

CONFESSION DE FOY,

*Faiçte d'un commun accord par les
fideles qui conuersent es pays bas,
lesquels desirent viure selon la pu-
reté de l'Euangile de nostre Sei-
gneur Iesus Christ.*



I. P I E R. I I I.

☞ Soyez toujours appareillez à respondre à cha-
cun qui vous demande raison de l'esperance qui est
en vous.

M. D. L X I.

By This Our Subscription

CONFESSATIONAL SUBSCRIPTION IN THE
DUTCH REFORMED TRADITION SINCE 1816

Roelf C. Janssen

BY THIS OUR SUBSCRIPTION



Theologische Universiteit
GEREFORMEERDE KERKEN

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THEOLOGISCHE UNIVERSITEIT VAN DE GEREFORMEERDE KERKEN
IN NEDERLAND TE KAMPEN

**BY THIS OUR SUBSCRIPTION
CONFESSIONAL SUBSCRIPTION
IN THE DUTCH REFORMED TRADITION SINCE 1816**

***“MET DESE ONSE ONDERTEECKENINGE”
BINDING AAN DE BELIJDENIS
IN DE NEDERLANDSE GEREFORMEERDE TRADITIE VANAF 1816***

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

TER VERKRIJGING VAN DE GRAAD VAN DOCTOR IN DE THEOLOGIE,

OP GEZAG VAN DE RECTOR DR. C.J. DE RUIJTER,

HOOGLERAAR IN DE THEOLOGIE,

ZO GOD WIL IN HET OPENBAAR TE VERDEDIGEN

OP VRIJDAG 19 JUNI 2009

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door

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Foreword

In 1993 I began my studies for a Masters in Divinity at the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches in Hamilton, Ontario. Upon completing those studies I was advised to continue my education at its “sister” institution in The Netherlands, the Theological University in Kampen (Broederweg). Arriving in 1997 I entered a study programme to gain a *doctorandus* title. Part of the programme including writing a Masters Thesis; mine was on the subject of confessional subscription in the eighteenth century in the Dutch Reformed Church.¹ Having adequately completed this programme, I was admitted to a Ph.D. programme in the ecclesiological department. The subject of my study again became confessional subscription in the Dutch Calvinist tradition.

I spent many years in the basement of the theological library, leafing through acts and uncovering old publications on the subject. The sheer volume of reading material was at times disheartening. Being the kind of person who wants to share his findings, concentrating the data into a manageable and readable format proved a Herculean task. It was with a sigh of relief that I wrote a chapter in which the year 2000 was mentioned. The historical survey had been completed. As I had anticipated, the analysis and systematization of the data was less time consuming. However, the labour was different. Now the matters had to be thought through; attempts had to be made to discover links and relationships between the various elements that make up the whole of confessional subscription and the factors that affect it. Within a year and a half, this process also came to completion. Then came the process of submitting the dissertation and waiting for a judgment. In late spring 2008, I was told that in essence the dissertation met the required academic standards.

However, aspects of the layout and format of my dissertation were not appreciated. This did not surprise me. During my course of study, I have constantly been struggling with meeting academic standards, including being brief and to the point, while at the same time trying to meet the needs of my intended reader: someone who has no knowledge of the Dutch language, and might well read English as a second language. Given the judgment of those who advised the Senate, I have chosen to create two publications: an academic dissertation and a publication in the format of a reference work. For the latter I will be seeking a publisher. The dissertation—the work now in the reader’s hands—has been published privately.

Many people that have assisted me in my reflection and considerations, as well as in the research for and writing of this study. In particular, my thanks go to those who have assisted me during the course of my studies: Dr. J. A. van Eynatten, Dr. J. Vree, Dr. P. L. Voorberg, drs. I. D. Haarsma, Dr. R. S. Ward, Ing. J. de Graaf, and drs. G. van Rongen (whom the Lord has taken). I am grateful for the input of Mr. K. McGrane, who ploughed through this dissertation sentence by sentence to make sure the English was up to standard and Mrs. H. C. M. Remijnse for checking the Dutch summary. My thanks also go to those who formed the assessment committee for the Senate—they provided much useful feedback that has been incorporated into the final format of this dissertation—Dr. E. A. J. G. van der Borgh, Dr. B. Kamphuis, Dr. F. van der Pol, Dr. N. Kloosterman, and Dr. J. W. Maris. I would like to thank the *Onderzoeksgroep Kerkrecht en Kerkgeschiedenis* of the theological universities in Kampen (Broederweg) and Apeldoorn, who reflected with me on certain elements of my study, and gave pointers with respect to the more practical and organizational sides of doing research and writing a dissertation. I especially wish to thank my promoter, Dr. M. te Velde, for the many discussions we have had, and his patience and endurance with my sometimes foreign approach to matters and failure to understand the Dutch way of doing things. In this context, I again wish to mention Dr. J. W. Maris of the Theological

¹ Janssen, *Statisch of Dynamisch?*

Foreword

University in Apeldoorn, as he was willing to fill in for Dr. Te Velde when the latter fell ill. My thanks go to the churches in which I served during the course of this study, Nagele and Hoek, for the time they allowed me to study. I also wish to express my gratitude to my wife—whom I got to know during the course of this study and for whom this study is part of me—and to my children since they have had to endure much and miss much on account of the study. Most of all, I render thanks to my heavenly Father for granting the opportunity and energy to read through so many pages, to organize my thoughts on the issue of confessing and confessional subscription, and to produce something that, I hope, will be of profit for His church-gathering work.

Writing on a “hot issue” is not without risks. Confessional subscription is constantly being debated, new insights are continually gained, and positions are constantly being fine tuned. Over the course of ten years of study, I have frequently had to adjust my own stance. Undoubtedly that process will continue. I consider myself still a young man, lacking the experience to discern sensitivities and how to deal with them. There is yet much to learn! I therefore do not doubt that my evaluations and proposals will be carefully scrutinized and probably criticized. Some will feel I have missed out a crucial publication. Some will think that I am tied too much to my ecclesiastical background: the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (vrijgemaakt)*. Some may even think that I have transgressed the boundaries of my own subscription and rejected my own tradition. I pray that all who read this material will do so with an open mind, in an honest endeavour not to go beyond the boundaries of divine revelation, and keeping in mind that there is but one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church holding to one faith in one Triune God, knowing but one baptism and one table. All are invited to join in reflecting upon this Gordian knot of ecclesiology.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. I wish the reader a pleasant meal. I sincerely hope that this study will contribute to the unity, sanctity, catholicity and apostolicity of the church worldwide, and accelerate the dialogue between Reformed churches in different countries and cultures.

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1. Introduction

“No creed but the Bible” is a commonly heard phrase in church circles. It would seem that the role of confessional documents in the church has been hotly debated always and everywhere. The questions are manifold. How does one determine the boundary between binding and tolerance? How can one best ward off heresy? Is it in keeping with the spiritual character of faith to exercise disciplinary measures against those transgressing the boundaries of the church’s confessing? Indeed, is it in keeping with the spiritual character of faith to adopt ecclesiastical laws on boundaries of doctrinal tolerance? Are the confessions binding *quia* or *quatenus* their agreement with God’s Word (or should that be *quippe*)? Are church schisms on the basis of confessions ever justified in the sight of God? Is the church to be a confessional church or a confessing church? May the church expand or change its confessional heritage? Should *all* office bearers subscribe the confessions? Should church members who are not office bearers be considered bound to all the confessions of the church? What are the responsibilities of the various ecclesiastical assemblies with respect to doctrine and doctrinal discipline? May a delegate to an ecclesiastical assembly be refused participation because his confessional faithfulness is drawn into doubt by the assembly? Of what influence is culture on a church’s approach to confessional binding? Of what influence are questions that belong to other associated fields of science: philosophy, anthropology, and justice?

All these questions form part of two centuries of debate on confessional binding in Reformed circles within The Netherlands. They have been collated, considered, and comprehended during some ten years of study. The result of this labour is found between the covers of this dissertation.

This introductory chapter will provide an outline of the impetus to this study (1.1), how this study has been delimited (1.2), the present status of research and publications on this issue (1.3), and the methodology followed in researching and presenting the material (1.4).

1.1 Impetus to Study

Confessional subscription is a subject that touches on the essence of the church. Portions of Scripture are thought to bear a confessional character, and the first Ecumenical Council, in warding off what it considered false doctrine, drew up a confessional statement and required subscription to it. Ever since that first ecumenical council, doctrinal statements in the form of confessional documents have been part and parcel of church life. Confessional documents have been used to set the boundaries of the church when doctrinal debates were thought to get out of hand. Once they existed, confessional documents themselves have evoked discussions, leading to the formation of more confessional statements. A cursory glance at the history and practice of the church worldwide is sufficient to conclude that confessions and confessional subscription belong to those elements that characterize and shape the church.

In spite of the significant role played by confessions and confessional subscription, there seems to have been little general research into these phenomena. It must be admitted that the subject is hotly debated, including in publications. However, such studies are often initiated by a struggle in a church, a quest to justify one's own convictions, or as part of an endeavour to create a church union. As such, these studies frequently have a particular starting point and therefore run the risk of reviewing the material from a particular perspective. While they may adequately address a part of the whole, the part does not always fit into the whole, especially since reflection on the whole is rarely present.

Academic studies more removed from daily church life appear to display a similar defect. It would seem that academic studies of parts of the whole have no framework into which they might fit, no totality in which their product might function. An added problem would seem to be that both those on the battlefield and those behind their desks believe that they *do* have an overview of the whole.

An attempt to provide a more general consideration of the issue may be seen as both necessary and timely. For it is impossible to do justice to the phenomena of confessions and confessional subscription without an overview, without a framework, and without understanding what logical consequences a conviction on one element has for another.

Thus it became my endeavour to present a study that might serve as a first step towards such an overview, a study in which examinations of the various elements would come together, so that I could research and explain how various positions relate to each other and affect each other. The goal has been to develop a system in which confessions and confessional subscription might best play the role they are commonly accorded. This study was to provide something concrete and accessible, which might function as a platform from which to reflect further on the issues and fine tune them, or as a conceptualization by means of which various positions might be formed and articulated.

This academic desire has also received practical impetus. For when I began my research, I was also ordained to the ministry in the GKN(v).² In my ministry, the urgency of the matter became all the more clear to me, and was also impressed upon me by my colleagues.

As I am a minister in the GKN(v), a confessional church, my ecclesiastical activities always stand in relationship to the confessions. When entering the ministry, and upon moving from one ministerial charge to another, I was required physically to subscribe the confessions by placing my signature beneath a form drawn up for the very purpose of subscribing confessions. I did so, not only in the local church, but also in the classis. On behalf of the classis Axel, I have also participated in the examination of those aspiring to enter the ministry; one norm for that

² A list of abbreviations and their meaning may be found in Appendix I.

Introduction

examination is formed by the confessions. During the course of the year, I am required to preach from the Heidelberg Catechism. From September through to April, I teach young people from the catechism and other confessions of the church; for when they make profession of their faith, they do so in reference to the confessions of the church. Recently I was interviewed by a church council in respect of a possible call; one of the questions asked was whether the confessions featured in my sermons. The confessions I subscribe play an important role in my daily activities.

As someone who has grown up and been educated in various countries—Australia, Canada, and The Netherlands—I have been exposed to various forms of intercultural, interconfessional activity. Between 2002 and 2008, I served on the committee for Relations with Foreign Churches of the GKN(v). One of the mandates of this committee is to form an impression of the confessional character of other churches and so determine whether a relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship might be initiated.

As a minister specializing in church polity, I have also become more involved with questions relating to interchurch relations within The Netherlands. In the relationship between the GKN(v), NGK, and CGKN—and also various other Reformed denominations—the role of confessions and church tradition is a much-debated issue. Where should the boundaries be drawn and how should one deal with those who seek to restrict or expand those boundaries? What does this mean for those transferring from a church belonging to one federation to a church belong to another federation? What does this mean for a minister belonging to one federation of churches preaching in another type of federation?

The problems and questions one encounters are many.

There are formal problems. Should ministers sign the form of subscription twice? If so, should the form of subscription signed by a minister in the classis and in the church council be the same or be different? Should elders and deacons sign at the beginning of every term of office, or only the first time? Should a classis discuss a charge of doctrinal infidelity against a minister if the church council has determined the charge to be unfounded?

There are also problems of a more substantive character. What level of confessional knowledge should be expected of those wanting to profess their faith? And of deacons, of elders, of ministers? To what extent should there be agreement with the confessions? What should one do if one disagrees with the confessions? Who is to sit in judgment over one's confessional fidelity? If a deficiency is discovered in the confessions of the church, how might the gap be filled?

The more one engages the field, the more questions rise to the surface. Moreover, a little study of the history of the Reformed churches in The Netherlands quickly makes clear that such questions have always existed; churches and their members that stand in the Reformed tradition have constantly been struggling with the issue of confessions and confessional subscription.

This study thus receives its impetus both academically and practically.

As such this study will, the Lord willing, also result in two products. The first is this academic dissertation. The second will be a more extensive publication catering for a more popular audience.

1.2 Delimiting This Study

This study is focused on confessional subscription or doctrinal binding. Confessional subscription, a formal designation for the phenomenon, or doctrinal binding, an essential designation for the phenomenon, is the act of connecting a person with a confession or elements thereof in such a way that his ecclesiastical activities are affected. The nature of this connection, the type of person, and the sort of confession (and the elements thereof) are the more central subjects of this study.

Confessional subscription presupposes the existence of confessions. Thus the subject quickly broadens to “confessions and subscription to them.” While confessional subscription is properly the subject of this study, a large part is also devoted to the phenomenon of “confessions.” It should be emphasized, though, that confessions are always looked at from the perspective of subscription; this investigation is primarily of the juridical side of confessions. Much more could (and should) be said on confessions than will be said in this dissertation.

The issue of confessional subscription touches all churches in all times and all places. It would be impractical to conduct in-depth research into this issue by surveying all that is extant on the matter. It would have been wonderful to make use of studies of the various church traditions on this subject. These could then have been analysed, so as to come to systematic conclusions of a church-political nature. However, there are only very few such basic, general studies for the orthodox Reformed tradition. A systematic overview of the field of confessions and confessional subscription only proved achievable if I myself did the spadework of delving into historical data.

Hence I have not been able to write on confessions and confessional subscription in the broad sweeping way I would have liked. This study had to be delimited.

Since I belong to the Dutch Reformed tradition and am fluent in the Dutch language, it made sense to limit my study to Reformed Churches in The Netherlands. This is the tradition in which the results of GS Dordrecht 1618-19, especially the adoption of the Three Forms of Unity and the drafting of CO-1619, play a prominent role.

The question then became, how far back should the research go? Academic studies already exist on the history of the early Reformation period, which for The Netherlands is generally considered to have come to a close with GS Dordrecht 1618-19. During my Masters study I looked at the period after 1619 and discovered that there is very little to go on; in the end, I studied the early- to mid-eighteenth century.³ My research at the time also made clear that it would be quite time consuming to locate the necessary resources to adequately conduct the necessary study. Choosing an early starting point might mean finding insufficient time to cover the twentieth century adequately, a period well-known in Dutch Reformed church history for its consideration of issues relating to confessions and confessional subscription.

The year 1816 seemed a good place to start. In 1814, the Dutch nation was formed as a constitutional monarchy with a member of the House of Orange on the throne. Two years later, the Dutch Reformed Church was reorganized through the introduction of a new church order. This was the first longer-lasting change since GS Dordrecht 1618-19. It included a change of policy on the issue of confessional subscription. Thus 1816 serves adequately as a starting point.

Choosing a later starting point cannot be justified for the following reasons. Firstly, subsequent discussions of confessional subscription in Dutch Reformed communities generally used the reorganization of 1816 as a framework. Secondly, within two decades after 1816, the Dutch Reformed community began to splinter into various factions, partly due to discussions on the propriety and practice of confessional subscription.

³ Janssen, *Statisch of Dynamisch?*

Introduction

Finally, unlike primary sources dating from before 1816, the primary sources that would need to be consulted for debates after 1816 were readily accessible, so that time I might otherwise have been spending looking for sources could instead be used reading more sources.

Thus, this study focuses on the question how Reformed churches in The Netherlands have dealt with confessional subscription since 1816. That question might be phrased as follows:

Which views on confessional subscription have existed within the Dutch Reformed tradition since 1816 and which aspects of confessional subscription have received explicit attention?

However, the intention of this research was to come to understand the system of confessions and confessional subscription. Interest in the history of this subject serves a further goal: to come to grips with the issue and understand its ins and outs in the context of the whole.

Hence this study focuses also on the question of how those in the Reformed churches in The Netherlands have considered the propriety of confessional subscription, and which factors play a role in this. That question might be phrased as follows:

Which systematic aspects can be discerned from the discussions on confessional subscription within the Reformed tradition in The Netherlands, how do these aspects relate to each other, and how might one regulate confessional subscription adequately?

As a minister in the GKN(v), my research and study has not merely sought to be descriptive. The confessions that form part of this investigation articulate my own faith. Thus the questions that interest me are not only how subscription *has been* done and how it *might be* done, but also how it *should be* done. The framework within which it *should be* done, is, for this dissertation, that of divine revelation (Scripture) and the church tradition in which the GKN(v) stands, that of Dortian church polity. In essence, this third question is not one that should receive a place in an academic study. However, I have found that the process of formulating principles and procedures in documents (church order articles, liturgical forms, and forms of subscription) forces one to think clearly. At the same time, it is this product that makes clear how I myself feel the rubber of church political regulations could hit the road of ecclesiastical practice. Thus during the course of this study, a number of regulative texts have been drafted. Since these texts are not truly an academic goal but simply a means, an overview of this “final product” has been placed in Appendix III.

In short, this study aims to provide answers to the following two questions:

1. *Which views on confessional subscription have existed within the Dutch Reformed tradition since 1816 and which aspects of confessional subscription have received explicit attention?*

2. *Which systematic aspects can be discerned from the discussions on confessional subscription within the Reformed tradition in The Netherlands and how do these aspects relate to each other?*

1.3 Research

General, analytical, diachronic research in this hotly debated matter appears to be sadly lacking in Dutch circles. With respect to creeds and confessions in general, the following studies in English are worth noting. The three volume study by P. Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, continues to be popular. Of more recent date is J. H. Leith's *Creeds of the Churches*. For the earliest history of creeds, J. N. D. Kelly's *Early Christian Creeds* (latest edition 1972) continues to be cited as an authority.⁴

There are some quite substantial studies on the origin and functioning of confessions in the German regions during the sixteenth century, primarily with a view to the Zwinglian and Lutheran traditions. A recent publication, *Fortress Introduction to the Lutheran Confessions* by G. Gassman and S. Hendrix, gives ready access to these materials. With respect to confessions and confessional subscription in the Calvinist tradition, there seems to be much less material. An English language publication that gives ready access to materials is *The Practice of Confessional Subscription* edited by D. Hall. Of course, mention should also be made of the lemmas "Bekenntnisschriften" and "Lehrverpflichtung" in the *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* and the lemma on "confessions and creeds" in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*.⁵

The most general study on the matter in Dutch is probably L. Doekes' *Credo*, which is on the reading list of most Dutch theological curriculae. An earlier work is the extensive introductory essay in the first volume of A. D. R. Polman's *De Nederlandse Geloofsbelijdenis*.⁶ In general, however, systematic and reflective thoughts on confessions and confessional subscription tend to be hidden in commentaries on confessions or on the church order, and more popular publications and articles. These prove to be less helpful than one might hope. Discussions in commentaries, however, tend to be too brief to be all-encompassing, while discussions in individual articles and publications tend to focus on just an aspect of the field of confessions.

There is, however, another important source for systematic reflection. It is to be found, not in studies, but in reports submitted to churches and assemblies of churches. Reflections especially during the *Samen op Weg* process and during the debates within the GKN(v) in the second half of the twentieth century render fruitful material. It is regrettable, to say the least, that such materials are buried in documents not easily accessible, and therefore little used. Hopefully, this study will at least enable those interested in the matter of confessional subscription to locate such materials; it also offers a framework within which to read and compare them.

There have been some quite noteworthy historical studies. Because confessions played an important role in Dutch church history, publications on the history of the church in The Netherlands discussed this matter at length. Of note are the publications authored or edited by A. Ypey and I. J. Dermout, J. Reitsma and J. Lindeboom, A. J. Rasker, O. J. de Jong and, very recently, H. J. Selderhuis.⁷

The earliest period of Calvinist confessions in a Dutch environment, closing with GS Dordrecht 1618-19, has received ample attention in various dissertations and popular studies. The more important academic studies are those by H. Schokking and F. S. Knipscheer, as well as extensive

⁴ Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*; Leith, *Creeds*; Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*.

⁵ Gassmann and Hendrix, *Introduction to Lutheran Confessions*; Hall, *Practice*; Balz and others, *TRE; Enc. Chr.* Schaff can be accessed via www.ccel.org. On the Calvinist tradition, a publication of a Dutch translation of five Calvinist confessional documents is in the making; the second chapter of this book will present an overview of the earliest history of confessions in the Protestant tradition, in particular the Calvinist tradition.

⁶ Doekes, *Credo*; Polman, *NGB*, vol. 1.

⁷ Ypey and Dermout, *Geschiedenis NHK*, Reitsma and Lindeboom, *Geschiedenis*, Rasker, *De NHK vanaf 1795*, De Jong, *Kerkgeschiedenis*, Selderhuis, *Kerkgeschiedenis*.

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articles written by J. Borsius, H. H. Donker Curtius, and A. J. Fanoy; more popular is a study by C. Augustijn. Little study has been made of the functioning of confessions in the two centuries that followed. The period covered in this present study, 1816 to date, has received greater attention. W. Volger has published two volumes on confessions within the NHK in the nineteenth century in general, H. A. M. Fiolet addressed the issue, and D. Nauta wrote an informative publication on the confessional issue within conservative ranks within the NHK during the same period.⁸

It would seem that reflection of a more detached and all-encompassing nature in an academic setting is generally lacking or outdated. Furthermore, historical materials are often used eclectically to suit the author's purposes when looking at an aspect of the confessional issue. Moreover, these materials are interpreted in various—sometimes even opposing—directions.⁹ In this study, the data will be updated and biases in various studies will be pointed out.

In short, in this study, interaction is primarily with material dating from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Thus this study is contemporary and yet stands in a particular historic tradition. In systematizing the data and arriving at a particular position, interaction will take place with the positions held today in the various church organizations that trace their origin back to GS Dordrecht 1618-19. Of particular interest have been the reflection within the NHK during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, reflection during the *Samen op Weg* process of the second half of the twentieth century, and reflection within the GKN(v) and NGK.

⁸ Schokking, *Leertucht*, Knipscheer, *Invoering*, Borsius, "Overzicht", Donker Curtius, "Formulier en Verbindtenis", Fanoy, "Ondertekeningformulier", Augustijn, *Kerk en belijdenis*, Volger, *Leer*, Volger, *Vrijheid*, Fiolet, *Onrust*, Nauta, *Verbindende kracht*.

⁹ As this study will indicate, this is what happened with Groen van Prinsterer's position on confessional subscription.

1.4 Methodology

Both historical and textual studies are necessary in order to become acquainted with the practice codified by the church and to gain a good grasp of the various factors involved. Historical debates provide insight into the possibilities from which those who drew up a particular code could choose, and official documents mark key moments in the history of the code. Study of both these elements is required if one wishes to consider other options at some future time. The third activity, systematization, follows logically from the other two. One cannot simply compose a new position from an eclectic choice of the data produced by historical and textual studies. One must look at the whole, consider the whole, and attempt to think beyond the whole, so as to fit a code or practice into a larger picture, and thus arrive at a fine-tuned position on the subject. Historical and textual research provides the data, and systematization processes this data to produce a product that itself becomes part of the history and may thus influence a new code. Schematically put:

Historical research + Textual research → factors
Factors + Systematic reflection → a particular stance

To gain a proper understanding of confessional subscription, it is imperative to understand its history. Thus this study looks first of all at the course of reflection on confessional subscription in Dutch Reformed circles since 1816. This material is found in part 2. However, this study intends to be primarily systematic. Hence the study of the course of confessional subscription in Dutch Reformed circles is not an end in itself, but serves a further purpose. It might be thought that the debates of the past will make clear which factors and elements play a role in the phenomenon of confessional subscription. This study will prove this conviction correct in practical way.

The historical survey will serve, first of all, to paint as broad a picture as possible of discussions and debates. Thus an attempt will be made to give an overall impression of this unwieldy issue. At the same time, the historical survey serves to make clear which factors have been hotly debated, which premises have served to determine the various positions, and which conclusions have been drawn from the various thoughts in varying combinations. Finally, the complexity of the historical survey—it covers more than half of this publication—will itself demonstrate that the issue of confessions and confessional subscription is not easily solved and cannot be dealt with in a brief essay or such.

Another way in which to elicit the factors involved in confessional subscription is to study the texts by which this subscription has been codified. Hence the second part of the research was devoted to a collation of materials officially adopted by various Dutch Reformed churches in relation to their practice of confessional subscription: primarily articles from church orders and forms of subscription. The documents prior to 1816 have been drawn from reliable secondary sources; those after 1816 from primary or otherwise authoritative sources. These documents were meticulously compared in order to ascertain their differences and, where possible, to indicate why these differences had come about. These have been translated to make them accessible to readers who have no knowledge of the Dutch language. Translations of official texts can be found at the appropriate place in the text of part 2.¹⁰

The insights gleaned from the foregoing make analysis, systematization, and reflection on the subject of confessional subscription possible. This is not the mechanical process of re-arranging the data, but involves original thought and insight in testing the logic and weighing goals and instruments. Such may be considered a third approach of working with the subject. The product of

¹⁰ It is my intention to make an annotated overview of these texts accessible via www.kerkrecht.nl, and to have it published in a later reference work.

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this process is the material found in part 3. The procedure here has been to work in concentric circles, looking first at matters that affect the context in which confessional subscription operates, and proceeding via the subjects of “faith, doctrine and church” and “confessions” to the innermost circle, the matter of confessional subscription. The real fruit of all this labour is a series of concrete proposals for codifying the practice of confessional subscription in a manner justified by Scripture and in keeping with the tradition of the Dutch Reformed.

As is proper, this study closes with a conclusion (4) drawing the strands together. In it, a summary of the findings will be presented, and suggestions will be made as to areas that require further attention.

In short, by way of historical and textual study, the various factors that play a role in the phenomenon of confessional subscription have been collated and examined. By way of systematizing these factors and reflecting on the insights, various stances on aspects of the issue of confessions and confessional subscription have been taken. In this process, a series of concrete proposals for the practice of confessional subscription have been formulated.

2. Historical Part

Since the practice of confessional subscription took shape in Dutch Reformed circles in the mid- to late-sixteenth century, the propriety of confessional subscription has been frequently debated. The historian wishing to research these debates is confronted with an ocean of books, pamphlets, speeches, and correspondence addressing this matter. Given the current stage of research, it is not possible to draw on the whole history of these debates; this would involve a prodigious amount of archival research. Hence 1816 has been chosen as the starting point, since the last two centuries of debates elicit most if not all of the factors that play a role in confessional subscription today. However, even this limitation has not meant that the historical survey could be exhaustive. In what follows, the study is restricted to the main issues and the primary moments of reflection. As such, the historical overview is sufficiently representative to present an overall picture of reflection on confessional subscription over the past two centuries in Dutch Reformed circles.

This is not the first study on the history of the practice of confessional subscription in general, or in the Netherlands in particular. Therefore, a brief overview is first presented of the practice of confessional subscription and matters directly related thereto since the inception of the Christian Church (2.1). This serves to paint the background to and indicates the framework of this present study.

Focus is then narrowed to the Low Countries. The period prior to GS Dordrecht 1618-19 has been the subject of much research and reflection. Accordingly, the more important literature on this topic is reviewed, and the path to formal subscription as adopted by the churches nationally in 1619 is briefly sketched (2.2). Reflection on confessional subscription in the period between the successive general synods of Dordrecht (1619) and The Hague (1816) has only recently received academic attention. The extant literature for this period is outlined, and the main moments of reflection during these two centuries are briefly indicated (2.3).

Research for this present study takes its starting point around 1816. The modern Dutch nation was formed in 1814, creating a new political structure. One of its consequences was a change in the relationship between church and state. Not only were theory and practice aligned, but the internal organization of the “privileged church,” the NHK, became in part the concern of a civil ministerial department. This resulted in the reorganization of the church. Part of this reorganization was the introduction of a new form of subscription, embodying ideas that had developed in Reformed circles in the previous decades.

Thus the history of reflection on confessional subscription during the two centuries after 1816 is reviewed (2.4–2.11). Each chapter covers a specific period, the limits of which are determined by various factors outlined in the introductory paragraphs to these chapters. In these chapters the primary focus is on publications (both private and ecclesiastical) that relate to confessional subscription. The historical situation is sketched to the extent necessary to understand reflection on confessional subscription within its historical context. Each chapter closes with a summary of the various positions and points raised in relation to confessional subscription during the span of time reviewed. The last three chapters (2.12–2.14) cover the same period, but concentrate on developments within subgroups of Dutch Reformed churches.

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, a brief overview on the history of creeds is presented, paying particular attention to confessional subscription since the inception of the Christian Church. Three periods are considered. Firstly, the period that is dominated by the so-called symbols and ecumenical councils, from the inception of the Christian Church to the fifteenth century; in view of the confessions that were generated it is termed the credal period (2.1.1). Secondly, the period generally referred to as the Great Reformation, in which many confessions, catechisms and canons were drawn up and adopted by national churches—confessional documents generally more detailed than the earlier symbol; this is termed the confessional period (2.1.2). Thirdly, the period that led to large-scale confessional indifference; this is termed the modern period (2.1.3).¹¹

2.1.1 THE CREDAL PERIOD

It is generally accepted that Christian credal formulas can be found in the New Testament. Such formulas are either of a personal nature (e.g. Mark 8:29 and 1 Cor. 12:3) or have been stylized into poetic form (e.g. Phil. 2:5-11). “Tradition” in its literal sense, “that passed on”, was important (1 Cor. 11:23; 15:3, 2 Tim. 2:2). Confessional statements seem to have their origin in a specific situation, either in relation to admission to the church, or with respect to professing one’s faith to those who need to hear it. The tradition of the apostles was considered binding, as the strong words of the apostle Paul found in Galatians 1:8-9 bear out. Those who did not bring the correct gospel were not to be considered welcome (2 John: 9-10).

Already during the first two centuries of the Christian era, the church considered it necessary to take a confessional stance over against false doctrines, particularly those of Gnosticism, Marcionism, and various teachings on the natures of Christ. Campbell follows Pelikan’s conclusion that as early as AD 190 the churches had developed a consensus on what could be regarded as orthodox. There were four tests:

1. Continuity with the Hebrew Scriptures
2. Continuity with apostolic writings
3. Continuity with an accepted “rule of faith”
4. Continuity with apostolic bishops.¹²

It has been claimed that during the first centuries of the church, confessions became “the rule of faith”.¹³ Confessions varied in style because they served a variety of purposes: catechetical, anti-heretical, and liturgical. Though it is commonly thought that creeds developed around the rite of baptism, Kelly has argued that creeds developed from the need to catechize novices and that the origin of the Apostles’ Creed is to be found therein.¹⁴

During the course of the third century, as Christianity escaped from the scourge of persecution, confessional statements were determined by councils. This process was especially catalysed by doctrinal struggles relating to the Trinity and the person and nature of Christ. Two such creeds from those times have survived and continue to be upheld by churches across the world: the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and the Athanasian Creed. Together with the Apostles’ Creed, these are often referred to as the Ecumenical Creeds.

¹¹ The information that follows is largely drawn from *Enc. Chr.*, s.v. “Confessions and Creeds” (by Müller and Rohls); Balz and others, *TRE*, s.vv. “*Bekennnisschriften*” (by Wirsching), “*Lehrverpflichtung*” (by Daur); Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 1; Leith, *Creeds*, introductions to the various creeds; Pelikan, *Christian Tradition*, 1-4, various sections; Campbell, *Christian Confessions*, various sections; Doekes, *Credo*, 1-203.

¹² Campbell, *Christian Confessions*, 22; see Pelikan, *Christian Tradition*, 1:108-120.

¹³ *Enc. Chr.*, s.v. “confessions and creeds”, 636; see Doekes, *Credo*, 13.

¹⁴ Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 30-52; followed by Doekes, *Credo*, 13-14.

It has been claimed that confessions were originally a statement of faith but were modified by the Roman Catholic Church into statements of what is to be confessed. “We believe” (Nicaea) became “we teach that this is to be confessed” (Chalcedon) and finally “whoever does not believe ... is condemned” (Athanasian Creed).¹⁵

With the adoption of anti-heretical creeds, binding to such creeds by means of subscription was also introduced. According to Schaff, the signing of the Creed adopted by the Council of Nicaea (AD 325) is “the first instance of such signing of a document in the Christian Church.” Also worth mentioning is the seventh canon of the council of Laodicea (AD 364) which states that heretics are “to have thoroughly learned the symbols of faith.” In 1273 or 1274 the deputies sent from the Eastern Church to the Council of Lyons II were obliged to subscribe the unchanged Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. It would thus seem that the custom of subscribing credal formulas is as old as the oldest extant credal formula adopted by an ecumenical council.¹⁶

It would be wrong, however, to assume that subscription as a custom was identical in both the Western and Eastern Churches. In the Western Church it was commonly practised. However, though the Eastern or Orthodox Church considers the decisions of the seven ecumenical councils to have credal authority, it does not have a tradition of confessions and subscription like that found in the Catholic and Protestant traditions. An authority on Orthodoxy states it as follows:

At a true Ecumenical Council the bishops recognize what the truth is and proclaim it; this proclamation is then verified by the assent of the whole Christian people, an assent which is not, as a rule, expressed formally and explicitly, but *lived*.¹⁷

2.1.2 THE CONFSSIONAL PERIOD

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries form a new era with respect to confessions and subscription to them. In the Early Church and the Roman Catholic Church, the content of the Christian faith was regarded as unalterably fixed from the beginning.¹⁸ The Reformers, however, were willing to challenge doctrinal positions of the past, even of those in whose tradition they considered themselves to stand (e.g. Augustine). Beginning with Scripture, the Reformed tested the teachings of the church.

The first “confessional” documents of the Reformation were in fact apologies. In 1523, Zwingli defended his faith before the council of Zürich via sixty-seven articles, and a number of Reformers defended the Reformed faith before the council of Bern via ten articles in 1528. These apologies were initially directed against Rome. However, as faith convictions within the Protestant movement diversified, apologies also addressed differences among Protestants.

In 1530, Emperor Charles V of Germany convened a national council in Augsburg to consider the religious adherence of the German states. For this purpose those discontent with the Roman Catholic Church—led therein by Luther and Melancthon—had penned a confession that became known as the *Confession of Augsburg*. Also submitted was the *Tetrapolitan Confession*, written by

¹⁵ *Enc. Chr.*, s.v. “dogma” (by Peters), 864. B. Kamphuis pointed out to me that Peters’ speaking here of the Roman Catholic Church is anachronistic.

¹⁶ On Nicaea see Schaff, *History*, 3:629 and Doekes, *Credo*, 20. On Laodicea (Canon VII), see Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 40. Kelly omits the word “thoroughly”, it is however found in Schaff’s *The Seven Ecumenical Councils* (see: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.viii.vii.iii.viii.html>). The original reads: “ἐκμανθανοντας τα της πιστεως συμβολα.” (Source: Jonkers, *Acta et Symbola*, 87.) On Lyons II see Campbell, *Christian Confessions*, 29-30, 71. The fact that credal or doctrinal subscription was commonly practised as early as the fourth century is confirmed by a search on the term “subscribe” in Schaff’s *The Seven Ecumenical Councils* (volume XIV of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church. [Second Series]*), accessible via <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.toc.html>.

¹⁷ Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy*, 12. The quote is from Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1997), 253; the emphasis is Ware’s.

¹⁸ *Enc. Chr.* s.v. “dogma, history of” (by Meijering), 867.

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Bucer and Capito, and the *Fidei Ratio*, written by Zwingli. It became clear at Augsburg that the Protestants were divided among themselves.

In the wake of Augsburg, confessional documents were drafted and adopted in various parts of central and north-western Europe. In 1534, the city council of Basel decided to require civilians to take an oath of allegiance to a confessional document drawn up by Oecolampadius and emended by Myconius. According to Doekes, “in the history of the Reformation this is the first instance of a ‘reformed’ church thus receiving an officially binding symbol.”¹⁹ In 1536, the city of Geneva bound its citizens to a confession of twenty-one articles that was originally drawn up by Calvin. Binding to a particular set of doctrines also became common practice in Germany. The Interim of Augsburg (1548) gave rise to the influential slogan that there can be no *adiaphora* in the practice of confession. It meant that “truth” as expounded by confessional statements became binding in the German states. With the adoption of the “*cuius regio eius religio*” policy for settling the confessional issue in Germany, each Protestant state had its own set of confessional statements, often including doctrinal treatises.

There were attempts to bring the various Protestant factions closer together. The *First Helvetic Confession* (1536) was acceptable to both Luther and the Zwinglian-inclined cities of Switzerland, and also adopted by various cities in Switzerland. However, this bond proved too fragile. In the next decade an attempt was made to bring Zwinglians and Calvinists closer together: this resulted in the Zürich Consensus in 1549, adopted by various Swiss cities. Doctrinal consensus was finally achieved in 1566 when the *Second Helvetic Confession* was adopted, a confession that has done service not only in Switzerland but also in Austria, Hungary (adopted 1567), and Poland.

Within the Lutheran world various doctrinal factions arose. Melancthon was a key figure in conciliatory endeavours, yet the *variata* version of the Augsburg Confession was not favourably received. Moreover, when Melancthon showed readiness to make concessions to Roman Catholic bishops, the Lutheran world began to fracture. The various German states and cities began to write and adopt their own *Corpus Doctrinae*. This confessional divergence was considered detrimental to the church, and civil authorities became suspicious of those that called themselves Lutherans but, in their opinion, were not. In 1577, the *Formula of Concord* was drawn up as an expression of what united the Lutheran churches, but this formula was not universally adopted throughout the Lutheran world. In 1580, a collection of Lutheran writings was published in the *Book of Concord*. Doekes notes that the adoption of the *Book of Concord* practically canonized Luther and made definite the division between Lutheranism and Calvinism.²⁰ Subscription to the *Book of Concord* was obligatory for all Lutheran pastors and state officials.

It is interesting to note that national documents were adopted in other regions of western Europe. Such documents were written not only with a view to internal unity among the Reformed but also to defend the existence of Reformed churches in regions where the (Roman) Catholic Church was the official church; it is argued that Calvin could not agree with this second reason for such confessions.²¹ Thus in 1559 the Calvinist churches in France adopted the *Gallican Confession*; in 1560, the Scottish adopted the *Scots Confession*; in 1561 the *Belgic Confession* was written and shortly thereafter adopted by the churches of the Low Countries;²² and in 1571 the Anglican Church adopted the *Thirty-nine Articles*. These documents were considered binding in the churches.

Some confessional documents were adopted for educational purposes. These catechisms (from the Greek *κατηχέω*, to instruct) were generally written in a question-and-answer format. Best

¹⁹ Doekes, *Credo*, 42.

²⁰ Doekes, *Credo*, 84.

²¹ Speelman, *Calvijn en de zelfstandigheid van de kerk*, 135-159.

²² Only in The Netherlands is it known as the Netherlands Confession of Faith.

known are Calvin's Catechism of Geneva, Luther's Smaller and Larger Catechisms, and the Heidelberg Catechism.

In the Low Countries, conflict arose among the Calvinists on various issues, especially concerning the doctrines of election and atonement. The dispute eventually led to a synod of the Dutch churches in 1618-19 to which foreign churches were invited. This body drew up the *Canons of Dort*.

In the British Isles, attempts were made to draw together the various currents of the Reformation. To this end, the Westminster Assembly was convened in the 1640s, which produced the Westminster Confession and the Shorter and Larger Catechisms. These documents were not a compromise or consensus of the various factions and thus failed to achieve the general goal of unity. However, the *Westminster Standards*, as these became known, have effectively replaced all other Calvinist confessions in the Anglo-Saxon world. In 1658, Congregationalists re-wrote parts of the Westminster Standards to produce the so-called *Declaration of Savoy* and adopted this as their confession.

The radical Reformation was averse to confessions, arguing that Scripture alone could suffice. Though there are documents outlining the doctrines of Mennonites, Socinians, Remonstrants, Baptists, and Quakers, these have no binding authority.

Confessional statements and documents have various origins—liturgical rites, catechetical instruction, the combating of heresy—and have fulfilled various roles. Since the time of the Reformation, the function of outlining the set of doctrine that ought to be believed has been predominant.²³ Subscription to confessions—whether explicitly via signature or oath, or implicitly via one's functioning in a particular church (and state)—was common in the regions of central and western Europe, both Roman Catholic and Protestant.

2.1.3 THE MODERN PERIOD: THE RISE OF CONFSSIONAL RELATIVIZATION

The account of confessions and subscription during the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries is very diverse. In some circles the old paths are still adhered to, in others there have been changes in approach.

Over against the Protestants, the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) has continued to value its dogma highly, both during and after the Reformation. Evidence of this are the decisions of the Council of Trent, Vatican I, Vatican II, and the New Catholic Catechism.²⁴ Pope John Paul II writes in the "Apostolic Constitution *Fidei Depositum*":

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ..., is a statement of the Church's faith and of catholic doctrine, attested to or illumined by Sacred Scripture, the Apostolic Tradition, and the Church's Magisterium. I declare it to be a sure norm for teaching the faith and thus a valid and legitimate instrument for ecclesial communion.²⁵

The position of the Eastern Orthodox Churches on confessions has not changed. Although the Synod of Jerusalem, 1672 did adopt a confession-like document, its function seems restricted to apologetic use. For educational purposes, the Catechism of Philaretus (1839) is used. However, neither of these have the same confessional status as the decisions of the ecumenical councils.

Among other churches, there has been a movement away from strict confessional maintenance and a tendency towards compromise. In this movement one may distinguish between reduction of confessions to a bare minimum (as illustrated by the World Council of Churches) and the adoption

²³ See Wirsching, "Bekennnisschriften", 489 in Balz and others, *TRE*; he speaks of confessions as a source for distinctive doctrines of particular churches ("*Quelle partikularkirchlicher Unterscheidungslehren*").

²⁴ For example, Doekes writes "From these and various other decrees of Vatican II it is evident that the Roman church continues to maintain its fixed doctrine integrally." Doekes, *Credo*, 203.

²⁵ Roman Catholic Church, *Catechism of the RCC*, 5.

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of confessions that may be considered at odds with each other (as in the PKN). However, both can be seen as evidence of a general increase in relativizing confessions. This has had its logical repercussions for confessional subscription: the bonds tend to be much looser than they were in the first two centuries after the Reformation.

Concerning the confessions and how they function in Lutheran churches in general today, a current authority states:

Scripture is the primary authority for Lutheran churches. This primacy, however, does not exclude other authorities. The ecumenical creeds, early church theologians, and sixteenth-century confessions are also authorities for Christian faith and practice. These confessions understand themselves as grounded in Scripture and subject to its authority. They also understand themselves as public summaries and declarations of the faith that were necessary in order to restore and to preserve genuine catholic Christianity in their time.

...

The confession documents are not just historical texts. They are also tradition, that is, vehicles for handing on the gospel as the central message of Scripture. Believers in every generation appropriate that tradition as they apply it to their own time and place, just as the authors of the confessions did. Subscription to the confessions, especially by public ministers of the church, means not just adherence to the words and their historical importance. Above all, it means making the authority of the gospel the center of their ministry and committing themselves to apply this tradition joyfully in their work today.²⁶

Within churches that were originally Calvinist in doctrine (for example, Anglicans, Presbyterians, the Reformed, and Independents) many debates arose over confessional issues and the role of confessions themselves. Not infrequently this resulted in church schisms, where the two parting factions viewed the confessions and subscription in different ways, and often differed on the value of the confessions. Since the second half of the nineteenth century, relativization of the confessions has made room for the union of churches hitherto considered irreconcilable (e.g. the Uniting Church of Australia as a merger of Congregationalists, Methodists, and Presbyterians). Usually a minority seeks to continue in the confessional tradition of original Calvinism (e.g. the Free Church in Scotland). Thus there are churches with Calvinist roots that feel comfortable in broad ecumenical associations such as the World Council of Churches, while others have created their own ecumenical context, such as the International Conference of Reformed Churches.²⁷ There is a wide range of stances towards confessions and confessional subscription within originally Calvinist churches. The study that follows will describe how this occurred in the Dutch context.

Those who have their roots in the Radical Reformation have continued their opposition to binding confessional documents. While “testimonies of faith,” “declarations,” “affirmations,” and “statements” are popular for outlining a certain theological stance, unequivocal binding to such documents is not. In theory, this approach is identical to that of those Lutheran and Calvinist churches that relativize confessions. Thus the boundary today between those with their roots in the Lutheran Reformation, the Calvinist Reformation and the Radical Reformation is often non-existent.²⁸

The world of more recent churches and church-like movements, such as the Seventh-Day Adventists, the Church of Scientology, the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints (Mormons), and the Jehovah's Witnesses, has not received attention. This would take us too far afield. One may find such material in Doekes.²⁹

²⁶ Gassmann and Hendrix, *Introduction to Lutheran Confessions*, 54-55.

²⁷ See www.oikoumene.org and www.icrconline.com.

²⁸ This is clearly illustrated by the PKN, which is a merger of Lutherans and Reformed in The Netherlands, and tolerates Unitarians (Socinians).

²⁹ Doekes, *Credo*, see index.

2.1.4 IN CLOSING

One may broadly distinguish three periods in the development of confessions: the credal period, the confessional period, and the modern period. During the credal period, confessions were drawn up to be maintained and professed by the catholic church. Hence these confessions are known as ecumenical creeds. These creeds were considered binding. During the confessional period, the period of the Reformation, confessions were drawn up as apologies and eventually came to function as demarcations of the doctrinal boundaries of a certain church. In most Protestant churches, such confessions became binding. During the modern period, confessions are increasingly relativized in Protestant churches—one may even speak of increasing confessional indifference. As a result, confessional subscription has weakened drastically. On the other hand, there continue to be churches that remain faithful to their church historical origin: the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Churches, and orthodox churches with Protestant roots.

2.2 Subscription in the Low Countries from Inception to GS Dordrecht 1618-19

The Belgic Confession of Faith was printed in 1561, and in 1563 the Heidelberg Catechism appeared in both German and Dutch. It would seem that as early as 1563 the Calvinist churches of the Low Countries³⁰ adopted the Belgic Confession of Faith at the Synod of Armentières.³¹ Alongside the Heidelberg Catechism, the decisions of Synod Emden 1571 suggest that at least two other catechisms functioned in the churches.³² Thus by the 1560s, confessions were already in use by Dutch Reformed churches. This did not mean, however, that the confessions immediately filled the roles they do today. One could characterize the period between the 1560s and GS Dordrecht 1618-19 as the period in which the Dutch Reformed churches developed, settled their church order, and thus came of age. This section reviews primary literature on this period that relates to confessional subscription (2.2.1), and briefly traces the development of confessional subscription (2.2.2).

2.2.1 LITERATURE

This section presents a brief overview of primary historiographical studies on confessional subscription, from its first appearance in the Low Countries until GS Dordrecht 1618-19. Since this period is not the primary focus of this study, there will be minimal discussion of the literature.

Skipping over histories written during the seventeenth century,³³ one noteworthy historiographical publication dated 1762 celebrates the bi-centenary of the Belgic Confession of Faith. Written by Rev. W. te Water of Axel,³⁴ this nearly 300-page booklet briefly sketches the origin, authority and use of the Belgic Confession of Faith in its first two hundred years. Te Water, and similar histories, in general defend the decisions of Dordrecht.³⁵

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, saw the publication of several studies on the period preceding Dordrecht that threw common understandings of confessional subscription into serious doubt. In 1834-35, Rev. H. H. Donker Curtius of Arnhem, a prominent church leader, published a series of articles on subscription, the first of which carefully scrutinized the form of subscription adopted by GS Dordrecht 1618-19. Donker Curtius was convinced that Dordrecht had gone too far.³⁶

In 1838, Rev. J. Borsius of Middelburg published an historiographical study on the development of subscription and forms of subscription until 1619.³⁷ Borsius argued that since the adoption of confessions in the early 1560s, their authority had increased with Dordrecht in 1619 to an unacceptable degree. He further noted that FS-1619 had not for the most part come into existence due to a struggle over doctrine, but rather had its origin in the struggle between church and state.

During the late nineteenth century, two orthodox church historians also battled over this material. Rev. J. J. van Toorenenbergen of Rotterdam argued that confessions ought to be revised every

³⁰ I use the term “the Low Countries” to refer to the region comprising present day the Netherlands, Belgium and parts of Germany before some of these regions federated into a nation by treaty in 1579 (Union of Utrecht).

³¹ Knipscheer notes that the Acts do not mention *which* “confession de foy” was adopted (Knipscheer, *Invoering*, 50).

³² Synod Emden 1571 art. 5 mentions the Catechisms of Heidelberg en Geneva by name, and allows also for “other Catechisms” (Biesterveld and Kuyper, *Handboekje*, 36). It seems quite likely that one other such catechism was the Catechism of Emden, written by J. a Lasco in 1554 (see Doekes, *Credo*, 71).

³³ I think especially of works by the Remonstrants Uytenbogaert and Brandt, and the Reformed Trigland, all of which are biased. On Trigland and Uytenbogaert as historiographers see Parker, “To the Attentive Non-Partisan Reader”, 57-78.

³⁴ For more information on persons referred to from this point on in my study, see appendix 2.

³⁵ Te Water, *Eeuw-getyde*. A similar publication, but briefer, is Rotterdam, *Zions roem en sterkte*.

³⁶ Donker Curtius, “Zin en strekking”, 733-763.

³⁷ Borsius, “Overzicht”, 285-376.

general synod, a view challenged by Rev. A. Kuyper of Amsterdam. Van Toorenenbergen and Kuyper also differed on the reasons why the professors at the University of Leiden in 1620 refused to subscribe as they had been requested. Van Toorenenbergen argued that the professors considered the Dordrecht subscription formulae too strict, while Kuyper argued that the professors felt that the Provincial Synod did not have the authority to demand their subscription.³⁸

During the first decade of the twentieth century, two monumental studies appeared on the practice of confessional subscription prior to Dordrecht. The first was a dissertation in 1902 by the *Hervormde* Rev. H. Schokking of Wezep entitled *Doctrinal Discipline in the Reformed Church of the Netherlands between 1570 and 1620*. Schokking presented the results of his research topically. In the first part of his publication, he reviewed the various ecclesiastical assemblies and their task concerning doctrinal maintenance. In part two, Schokking reviewed aspects of official ecclesiastical practice in regard to doctrinal maintenance. His work is detailed and gives the impression of being balanced.³⁹

In 1907, the Mennonite turned *Hervormd* Rev. F. S. Knipscheer of Groothuizen and Avenhorn published his dissertation entitled *The Introduction and Appreciation of Reformed Confessional Writings in The Netherlands prior to 1618*. His book divides into four chapters. Chapter 1 looks at confessions in Europe outside the Low Countries, and traces the development of the Reformation and the introduction of confessions in the period prior to 1568. Chapter 2 reviews the main Dutch synods between 1568 and 1618-19 on the point of confessional maintenance. Chapter 3 covers the same period, but examines confessional maintenance at the provincial level. The fourth chapter presents a brief overview of subscription to the Heidelberg Catechism. A conclusion follows in which Knipscheer expresses his view that Calvinism is not intolerant. He challenges many of Schokking's conclusions, arguing that "doctrinal discipline" was first introduced by GS Dordrecht 1618-19. The research for this present study indicates that Knipscheer's presentation of the information was warped to suit his own ends.⁴⁰

In 1928, the *Gereformeerde* Rev. A. J. Fanoy of Ferwerd published a two-part article entitled "The Form of Subscription for Ministers of the Word in the Light of the History of its Origin." In this article Fanoy repeated Borsius' endeavour to outline the origin of phrases found in FS-1619. This primarily literary endeavour is of great value to the subject of this present study, especially where it concerns the history of the text of FS-1619.⁴¹

In 1953, the Roman Catholic H. A. M. Fiolet defended his dissertation on the issue of confessional maintenance in the NHK during the nineteenth century. His first chapter very briefly summarized the more liberal view (e.g. of Donker Curtius, Borsius, and Knipscheer) of the developments before GS Dordrecht 1618-19. In 1967, the historian D. J. Mul published an article entitled "The nature of binding to confessional writings between 1561 and 1619" to counter Fiolet's claim that Dordrecht established "confessional coercion." Mul traces the issue of subscription via the synods of the sixteenth century, and concludes that Dordrecht 1618-19 was not the height of a very strict binding but a regression from such. Accordingly, Mul's article

³⁸ Van Toorenenbergen, "Confessioneele praktijk"; Kuyper, *Revisie* and Kuyper, *Leidsche professoren*. See 2.9.2.5-6.

³⁹ Schokking, *Leertucht*. In part 2 Schokking touches on the following subjects: examination for admission to the ministry of the Word, attestations for ministers, doctrinal discussions at assemblies, 'prophecy' (lay-preaching), ecclesiastical symbols, subscription, revision, gravamina, freedom of prophecy (freedom of exegesis), tolerance (temporary tolerance of deviations).

⁴⁰ Knipscheer, *Invoering*. Private contacts with Dr. J. Faber (former professor in dogmatics at the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches in Hamilton) and Dr. N. H. Gootjes (professor in dogmatics, Faber's successor) have confirmed this. It would seem to be a characteristic of Knipscheer's works; his biographer in *BLGNP* notes that Knipscheer "had no control over his pen and thus often burdened his accounts with confusing secondary material."

⁴¹ Fanoy, "Ondertekeningformulier"

complements Fanoy's article well. Noteworthy also is an article written by Prof. J. Kamphuis of Kampen dealing with an aspect of the text of FS-1619.⁴²

There are, of course, many other studies on confessional subscription which touch on the history of subscription prior to Dordrecht.⁴³ The aforementioned, however, are the main publications and well serve to orient the reader in this field. For the sake of completeness, it should be noted that the essay by W. R. Godfrey (professor in church history at Westminster Seminary, California) in *The Practice of Confessional Subscription* also briefly touches on this history.⁴⁴ To the present author's knowledge, it is the only substantial English language publication on this matter.⁴⁵

2.2.2 CONFESSIONAL SUBSCRIPTION⁴⁶

An historical overview of subscription in the Dutch Reformed community is now presented. The research underpinning it is almost entirely dependent on the secondary sources mentioned in the foregoing section. This has meant that passing value judgements on the process is avoided, although the studies of Schokking, Fanoy and Mul appear the more reliable.⁴⁷

2.2.2.1 THE 1560S

In 1561, the Belgic Confession of Faith was drafted as an exposition and apology of the Reformed faith for King Philip II of Spain, then ruler of the Low Countries. A Dutch translation of this confession became available as early as 1562. In 1563, Synod Armentières, one of the first synods of Reformed churches in the southern part of the Low Countries, prescribed subscription for all office bearers in the church: ministers, elders and deacons. According to Mul, this prescription was primarily a way of showing to what party one belonged, implying that the confession was primarily considered a rallying point. Subsequent synods, held annually, maintained such subscription. Of note is Synod Antwerp 1566, which thoroughly revised the Belgic Confession, removing what it considered to be unnecessary verbosity. In the meantime, the Heidelberg Catechism had been produced in 1563, and its third edition (also dating to 1563 and the first to contain q&a 80 on the Roman Mass) was translated into Dutch.⁴⁸

Persistent problems during these early days were the inadequate number of copies of confessions, and the uncertainty whether a copy was in fact correct. Matters were complicated when PS Noord-Holland 1583 adopted an official translation of the 1566 edition of the Belgic Confession. The churches now had two official Dutch editions of the Belgic Confession that varied in length. The problem of the correct version of the confession persisted until GS Dordrecht in 1618-19, which adopted fixed texts for the Forms of Unity.⁴⁹

⁴² Fiolet, *Onrust*; Mul, "Aard" Kamphuis, "Het gegeven woord"

⁴³ Readily accessible though rather brief is Bouwman, *Gereformeerde Kerkrecht*, 2:566-580.

⁴⁴ Godfrey, "Dutch Subscription"

⁴⁵ In 2007 the following was published: Gootjes, *Belgic Confession*.

⁴⁶ Van 't Spijker, "Voorgeschiedenis" 19-22, 108-112.

⁴⁷ It could be argued that a general church historical framework, including perhaps even a sketch of the political history of the Low Countries during these years would have been in place. As Reitsma and Lindeboom remark, the main problem of this time was the relationship church-state and the authority of the confessional writings (Reitsma and Lindeboom, *Geschiedenis*, 148). However, during this period the church reflected on confessional subscription without explicit government involvement (although the governments kept close tabs on what was happening on this point and tried to exercise influence). Hence I believe a political history would take me too far afield. It would also be interesting to trace several doctrinal debates to see how confessional subscription was practised. Again, this would take me way beyond the scope of this study. Moreover, there is sufficient secondary literature on this matter. English readers wishing to orient themselves in this period are directed to Hansen, *Reformed Church*, 75-183 and Duke, *Reformation and Revolt*, 199-293.

⁴⁸ On Synod Armentières see Mul, "Aard" 228-229.

⁴⁹ See Kuyper, *Post-Acta*, 347-353.

2.2.2.2 THE SYNODS OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY⁵⁰

The need was felt for church life in the Low Countries to be organized. To that end, leading figures met in 1571 in at least three locations in Germany. It was not considered safe to meet in the Low Countries due to the Spanish occupation. At a meeting in Wezel, a number of articles were subscribed by various persons. These Articles of Wezel, as they became known, stipulated, amongst other things, that prior to being examined, ministers were verbally to express their agreement with the confession and catechism.

The confession to be affirmed was described as “the confession presented to the French authorities [i.e. the Gallican Confession] and translated in the confession presented to King Philip [i.e. the Belgic Confession].” The articles of Wezel did not specify which catechism had to be affirmed. Mul concluded that in these articles the confessions functioned primarily as rallying points. Since the phrasing of the article specifically mentions the civil governments, one may infer that political motives played a role in affirmation. How such motives stood in relation to ecclesiastical motives (preservation of pure doctrine and the confessions as rallying point) is beyond the scope of this study.⁵¹

In October 1571, the churches met in Emden, another German city. Synod Emden decided that the Belgic Confession was to be subscribed as a token of unity in doctrine, and the Gallican Confession subscribed as a sign of unity with the French Reformed churches. Emden requested the French Reformed churches similarly to subscribe the Belgic Confession. Though Emden did not refer to subscribing a catechism, it did mention the possibility of using the Genevan Catechism, the Heidelberg Catechism, or “any other reformed catechism.” Given the emphasis on “unity” in this article, it appears that already at this early stage, ecclesiastical motives overshadowed political motives in relation to confessional subscription.⁵²

Wezel II.8

...After this the question shall be posed whether he agrees in everything with that doctrine, which is openly maintained in the church according to that contained in the Confession of faith, which was first presented to the King of France by Ministers of the church in that Kingdom and then, translated into the language of our land, was dedicated and passed on to the King of Spain and the other Governors of Nether-Dutchland, and which is finally also contained in the Catechism...

Emden A2 and 4

2. As proof of the unity in Doctrine among the Dutch Churches, the Brothers have thought it appropriate to subscribe the confession of Faith of the Dutch Churches, as also to subscribe the confession of the Churches in France, to testify in this way of her bond and unity with the same French Churches, being convinced that the Ministers of the same French Churches on their part will subscribe the confession of Faith of the Dutch Churches, as testimony to mutual unity.

4. Ministers of the Dutch Churches not in attendance at this gathering shall be exhorted to agree to the same subscription. All others who from now on are called to the ministry of the Word shall also do the same prior to entering into their service.

⁵⁰ For official texts of these synods, see Biesterveld and Kuyper, *Handboekje* and www.kerkrecht.nl. For a general description see Selderhuis, *Kerkgeschiedenis*, 312-322, 335-340.

⁵¹ On Wezel in general see De Jong, *Wezel and Emden*. In general the Convent of Wezel is dated to 1568 (e.g. Selderhuis, *Kerkgeschiedenis*, 312). However, it has also been suggested that it was held in juli of 1571, a few months prior to Synod Emden. Boersma suggests that Wezel was one of several preparatory meetings, one in Bedburg on July 4, 1571, one in Wezel soon thereafter, and a third in Emden prior to or on July 24. (Boersma, *Vluchtig voorbeeld*, 197-206). Godfrey is correct in stating that attendees were not requested to subscribe the confession (Godfrey, "Dutch Subscription", 67)). However, this should not be understood to imply that subscription was not discussed. See Mul, "Aard" 232.

⁵² On Emden see Nauta, Van Dooren, and De Jong, *Emden and Kamphuis, Zo vonden wij elkaar*.

Historical Part

The first synod of the northern churches on Dutch soil was held in Dordrecht in 1574. Synod Dordrecht 1574 prescribed simple subscription for ministers, elders, deacons and school teachers, and specified that subscription was to follow examination. Besides the confession (the catechism is not mentioned in this context), the articles of Wezel and Emden were to be subscribed. Although the synod was requested to subscribe the Gallican Confession, it refused to do so because the French Reformed churches had not responded to Emden's request. Finally, Dordrecht specified that only the Heidelberg Catechism could be used in the churches. Mul, in line with the seventeenth century reformed church historian J. Trigland, notes that it was at this synod that the confession began to take on a constitutional character. Mul considers the refusal to sign the Gallican Confession to be a sign of confessional exclusivism, and does not blame the church council of Delft for refusing to subscribe out of fear for confessionalism. Mul is of the opinion that Synod Dordrecht 1574 marks the zenith of confessionalism prior to GS Dordrecht 1618-19.⁵³

Soon after Synod Dordrecht 1574, classis Walcheren in Zeeland adopted a form of subscription, the first example of subscription by means of a form in the Low Countries. This form was in use until 1605, when the churches reverted to simple subscription.⁵⁴

Synod Dordrecht 1574 art, 14, 22.4 and 32

14. Upon the suggestion what shall be done with Ministers who are now in service but have not been examined or legally called or sent, R[espondit] The Classis shall examine them as if they have never served. And in case they are found to be incompetent in doctrine or life, they shall be suspended from their service until they are competent. And if they are competent, or if in them a hope of competence be found, they shall be first adequately corrected with respect to their former incompetence and rashness, then shall preach on a text of Scripture, shall subscribe the confession and articles, shall be bound in obedience and assembly to the Classis, shall be presented by one of the Ministers of the Classis, and establish a form of Church Council in the Congregation where they are to serve.

22.4 The Ministers shall ensure that the Schoolmasters subscribe the confession of faith, and subject themselves to the Discipline, as well as the Catechism and other materials which are useful in teaching the youth.

32. The Elders and Deacons, having been ordained in their service, shall subscribe the confession and articles of the Discipline.

FS-Walcheren-1574

We, here undersigned Ministers of the Word of God, within this island of Walcheren, believe and acknowledge by this, that the foregoing confession of faith of the Christian Congregations of the Netherlands, subjected under Co. Ma^d of Spain, contained in 37 Articles, reprinted in the Year LXXIII in Dordrecht, is equivalent to the word of God in all points. And therefore promise to direct our instruction and church service according to it, with instruction, comfort, and admonition. And to resist all that is opposed to it as we are capable.

We also acknowledge the Articles of the Synod of Emden, begun on 4th October and ended on 13 October in the year LXXI; likewise those of the Provincial Synod, held in Dordrecht, begun on 16th June and ended on the 28th of the same LXXIV, to be good and useful and adequate for the edifying of the Churches; promising to maintain all aforementioned Articles in all parts; and if there are Articles or points, which one of us could not hold to, that he is held to indicate such to the first Classis in an orderly and clear manner. And to abide by the judgement of that Classis until the first Provincial or National Synod and act accordingly.

⁵³ On Synod Dordrecht 1574 see Bremmer, *Uit de Geboortegeschiedenis*. Strictly speaking GS Dordrecht 1574 was neither a general synod nor a particular synod. In attendance were delegates from various classes of Zuid-Holland and Zeeland. Noord-Holland had also been invited but no delegates were in attendance. Noord-Holland did, however, at a later date ratify the acts of this synod. It was called a Provincial Synod in the sense that Synod Emden 1571 had intended it (Biesterveld and Kuyper, *Handboekje*, xx; Bremmer, *Uit de Geboortegeschiedenis*, 19).—Mul, "Aard" 235.

⁵⁴ To my knowledge no research has been done into the origins and functioning of this form. It is noteworthy that the chairman of Synod Dordrecht 1574, G. van der Heyden, was minister in Middelburg, the principle city of Walcheren.

Historical Part

In 1578, the Dutch Reformed churches assembled in synod, again in Dordrecht. Synod Dordrecht 1578 prescribed simple subscription to the Belgic Confession for professors and ministers, and considered it desirable for elders. Deacons were not mentioned. In contrast to Synod Dordrecht 1574, use of the Genevan Catechism was permitted. Mul considers the approach to the confession here to be a combination of rallying point and constitution.⁵⁵

In 1581, Synod Middelburg maintained this approach, but prescribed subscription also for deacons and schoolmasters.

In 1586, Synod The Hague prescribed subscription to the Belgic Confession for ministers and professors, and subscription to either the Belgic Confession or the Heidelberg Catechism for schoolmasters. Elders and deacons were not mentioned. Synod The Hague further added the stipulation that those who refused to subscribe were *de facto* suspended from office. According to Mul, the decisions of Synod The Hague should be seen in the light of an increasing number of sects in Holland. Mul disagrees with Borsius that Synod The Hague tightened the confessional bonds. Synod The Hague 1586 was the last national synod in Holland prior to GS Dordrecht 1618-19.⁵⁶

However, confessional subscription continued to develop at the provincial level. Synod The Hague had made room for subscription to the Heidelberg Catechism. Because many of the conflicts in the church centred around parts of the Catechism, it became common practice to demand subscription to the Heidelberg Catechism alongside subscription to the Belgic Confession. Subscription to both documents

Synod Dordrecht 1578—CO art. 50 and 53
50. *The Professors of Theology shall subscribe the confession of faith of the Dutch Churches.*

53. *As testimony of unity in Doctrine we consider that in all Churches of the Netherlands the confession of faith, contained in thirty-seven articles reprinted in this year 1578 and passed on to King Philip during many years, shall be subscribed. And as is done by Ministers of the Word and Professors of Theology, so it is proper that the same be done by Elders.*

Synod Middelburg 1581—CO art. 37 and PV 2.55
37. *The Ministers of the Word, Elders and Deacons, likewise the Professors in Theology (which is proper for the other Professors as well) and Schoolmasters shall subscribe the Confession of faith of the Dutch Churches.*

PV 2.55. *Whether Elders when entering their service should also subscribe the Church Order? Is answered, that they are to promise in the Church Council to help govern the church, in keeping with the Synodical articles, as long as the Synod has not changed them. And since their promise is written in the church book, a broader subscription is not necessary.*

Synod Den Haag 1586—CO art. 47-48
47. *The Ministers of the Word, likewise the Professors in Theology, which is proper for the other Professors as well, shall subscribe the confession of faith of the Dutch churches, and Ministers who refuse, shall de facto be suspended from their service by the church council or the Classis, until that point in time that they shall have given full explanation. And if they obstinately maintain their refusal, they shall be completely deposed.*

48. *Likewise the Schoolmasters shall also be held to subscribe the articles as above, or in their place those of the Christian Catechism.*

⁵⁵ Mul notes that this synod was not as ‘general’ as what Emden had envisaged (Mul, "Aard", 236). He does not explain why he considers this so, which is curious considering that not only were the Dutch churches represented, the refugee churches in England and the Walloon churches were also present.

⁵⁶ Borsius, "Overzicht" 316; Mul, "Aard" 237-239.—It should be noted that decisions taken by ecclesiastical assemblies could not always be executed. The authorities in each region had, in line with article 13 of the Union of Utrecht, the right to decide on matters of church order. This meant that many regions had government imposed church orders. The Church Order of The Hague 1586 was adopted only in Gelderland and Overijssel. See Reitsma and Lindeboom, *Geschiedenis*, 153-159. Secondary sources do not indicate that with respect to confessional subscription there was a difference between the “presbyterial” and the “Erastian” church orders which were introduced by provincial governments (see Selderhuis, *Kerkgeschiedenis*, 413-414). Knipscheer’s account indicates that in all the provinces, Utrecht being an exception in some ways, confessional subscription was introduced along the lines of GS Middelburg 1581 or GS The Hague 1586. See Knipscheer, *Invoering*, 79-190.

became mandatory in Noord-Holland and Zuid-Holland in 1593, in Drenthe in 1602, in Groningen in 1608, in Zeeland in 1610, in Friesland in 1611, and in Overijssel in 1618.⁵⁷

2.2.2.3 THE REMONSTRANT–CONTRA-REMONSTRANT STRUGGLE

During the closing decades of the sixteenth century, the Dutch reformed churches were internally divided. There were two parties, which, in the course of the conflict, became known as the Remonstrants and Contra-Remonstrants.⁵⁸ The Remonstrants objected to various points of reformed doctrine (especially predestination) and advocated an Erastian form of church polity. The Contra-Remonstrants maintained the reformed confessions and advocated the segregation of church and state. Thus the conflict had an ecclesiastical and a political side. Remonstrant ministers deposed by church assemblies were often protected by local magistrates. Afraid of what a general synod might decide, the national government blocked every attempt to organize such a synod. It was not until *Stadholder* Maurice of Orange chose for the Contra-Remonstrants in 1617 that a general synod could be convened.

For the matter of confessional subscription, this conflict is of great interest. Initially, the Remonstrants subscribed the confession. However, the Remonstrants considered this only an expression of unity, defending subscription to the main substance of the confessions. Hence Remonstrants also felt it was not necessary to subscribe more than one confession, and refused to subscribe if they had already done so previously. As this became more prevalent, the Contra-Remonstrants began to introduce subscription by means of a form so that it was clear to subscribers what subscription implied. In turn, the Remonstrants began to refuse subscription altogether. At the same time, Remonstrants requested that the Forms of Unity be submitted to thorough revision. Mul notes that during this conflict the confessions took on more of a constitutional character, especially for the Contra-Remonstrants. Schokking notes that the Remonstrants considered the subscription issue to boil down to the following dilemma: either the confessions are fully authoritative and binding in all aspects just as Scripture is, or they are not binding at all. The concept of derived authority, as promulgated by the Contra-Remonstrants, was foreign to the Remonstrant way of thinking.⁵⁹

Remonstrant-like ideas were defended as early as the 1580s. In some instances discipline was applied, but generally a conflict of interests between church and state prevented such discipline from having any effect. When in 1603 Rev. J. Arminius of Amsterdam was appointed professor in Leiden—where F. Gomarus was already professor—the issue took on national importance. The conflict between these two professors and their followers eventually led to the first schism in the Dutch reformed churches. The course of events with respect to confessional subscription is briefly traced out below.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Utrecht, the bulwark of the Remonstrants, was against subscription. See Fanoy, "Ondertekeningformulier", 488, where the references to the various provincial synod acts can be found.

⁵⁸ Remonstrants are also often referred to as "Arminians," as from a doctrinal perspective they were followers of Arminius. The Contra-Remonstrants are sometimes called "Gomarists" after Gomarus, Arminius' main opponent, or simply "the Reformed" or "Calvinists" as they maintained the doctrine of the Reformed confessions.

⁵⁹ On Remonstrant ideas on subscription see Polman, *NGB*, 1:16-19. It is sometimes thought that Remonstrants were opposed to every form of subscription. This notion is false. It is interesting to note how in Gelderland a form of subscription was adopted after the Remonstrant Vorstius had drafted three articles of faith and had a number of ministers sign these (Fanoy, "Ondertekeningformulier" 496-497). Even after GS Dordrecht the Remonstrants wrote their own confession (Polman, *NGB*, 1:16).—Mul, "Aard", 242. Schokking, *Leertucht*, 191-192. Schokking thus considered not the Contra-Remonstrants but the Remonstrants to be legalistic and formalistic in their way of thinking (Schokking, *Leertucht*, 204; see Mul, "Aard", 240).

⁶⁰ On the ineffectiveness of disciplinary measure I point to the courses of events with respect to Coornhert, Duifhuis, Sybrants, Coolhaes, Herbertsz, Wiggertsz, and Sneedanus. Incidentally, Reitsma and Lindeboom remark that only with reservations can these be considered forerunners of the Remonstrants (Reitsma and Lindeboom, *Geschiedenis*, 179).

In 1606, PS Zuid-Holland (Gorinchem) received a request to revise the confession. It refused to entertain such a thought because, as Mul explains, “revising the confession” was considered to imply “changing the doctrine found in the confession.” At a conference of Remonstrant and Contra-Remonstrant ministers held in 1607, the Contra-Remonstrants again argued that revising a confession was impossible since it would imply changing doctrine. Uncertainty arose as to what the Remonstrants (who were still placing their signatures beneath the confession and catechism) understood by subscription. Hence, forms of subscription were drafted and adopted in various regions, outlining precisely what this act entailed. On account of the conflict between Rev. A. T. Venator (Remonstrant) and Rev. C. Hillenius (Contra-Remonstrant), both of Alkmaar, Classis Alkmaar adopted a form of subscription in 1608. Classis Buren followed suit in 1610, though the duchess immediately annulled this decision. PS Zeeland (Veere) also adopted a form in 1610, as did PS Gelderland (Harderwijk) in 1612, PS Groningen (Groningen) in May 1613, and PS Drenthe (Assen) in September 1613. The churches in Zuid-Holland, which for a long period were forbidden by the provincial government to assemble in synod, drafted a form at PS Zuid-Holland (Delft) 1618. This form was not implemented but was to be considered by the forthcoming general synod.⁶¹

FS-Alkmaar-1608

We undersigned Ministers, belonging under the Classis of Alkmaar, declare and testify, that the Doctrine which is contained in this Catechism, adopted by the Ref. harmoniously, and in 37 Articles of the Dutch Ref. Churches, agrees in everything with the Holy Word of God, and hence with the foundation of Doctrine of Salvation. Promise, hence, to maintain this same Doctrine through God's grace; to reject publicly all teachings opposed to it, and to resist them with all diligence and faithfulness, according to capability, as we confirm the same in our writing.

2.2.2.4 GS DORDRECHT 1618-19⁶²

During the autumn, winter and spring of 1618/19, the Dutch Reformed churches met in general synod. It was at this synod that the third Form of Unity, the Canons of Dort, was written with the involvement of delegates from foreign churches. This synod also marked the consolidation of Reformed church polity on Dutch soil, including the issue of confessional subscription.

At the start of the synod, all members took an oath stating that they would judge the issues by the Word of God. The confessions were not mentioned as a standard of truth: indeed, they were denied a position as standard of truth. Remonstrant attendees challenged the instruction that the delegates from Overijssel had received, which contained the following clause: “that they shall judge according to the Word of God and the analogy of faith in the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism.” This was, the Remonstrants argued, an equating of Scripture and confessions. The delegates from Overijssel responded that the confession and catechism only served to indicate on which points of doctrine there is unity among the churches; only Scripture can be standard of the truth. Synod considered this explanation satisfactory. Thus, when it comes to the doctrinal issues, only Scripture functioned as standard, and thus the Canons of Dort contain no explicit references to other confessions.⁶³

⁶¹ On 1606 see Mul, "Aard" 239.—Hillenius was responsible for the introduction of formula subscription in Classis Alkmaar and the provinces Groningen and Drenthe.—Buren was an independent Dukedom (*Graafschap*) at this time, ecclesiastically it was part of PS Zuid-Holland.—Knipscheer reports that the classical resorts of Gelderland at this stage already each had their own form of subscription (Knipscheer, *Invoering*, 142-143).—The draft form of Zuid-Holland is no longer extant.

⁶² See Kuyper, *Post-Acta*, 316-390.

⁶³ On Overijssel see Kaajan, *Pro-Acta*, 37-39. On conclusions drawn from this see, for example, Heringa, *Zeven Stellingen*, 31-32 and Kuyper, *Revisie*, 123. This aspect formally distinguishes the Canons of Dort from the Walcheren Articles, see 2.3.2.3.

Historical Part

During its 164th session, GS Dordrecht adopted subscription by means of a form as normative for the Dutch Reformed churches. In this way, it would be clear to all what the rights and duties of subscribers were and, as the Acts indicated, “the wrong escapes of some” could be obstructed. It is interesting to note that CO-1619 only refers to subscribing the Confession, whereas the adopted form of subscription specifically referred to the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the newly drawn up Canons of Dort. Likewise, schoolmasters were required by the Church Order to subscribe either the Belgic Confession or the Heidelberg Catechism, but in their form of subscription they subscribed all three Forms of Unity. Subscription to the church order is not mentioned. Regarding subscription by elders, GS Dordrecht decided in its 175th session that synods and classes could decide on its necessity. It is further noteworthy that FS-1619 somewhat softened the line taken in some earlier forms: an ecclesiastical assembly was only permitted to demand an explanation of someone’s convictions when there were adequate grounds for suspicion.⁶⁴

With respect to the wording in the Church Order, the term “Belijdenisse” in art. 53 is singular. It is arguable that the term “belijdenisse” be considered an abstract term to refer to all the teachings of the church (MNT: s.v. “belijdenis”). However, the stipulation for schoolmasters (art. 54) reads “de Artijckelen als boven, ofte inde plaetse van dien den Christelijcken Catechismum” (“the Articles as above or in their place the Christian Catechism”). This clearly implies that “Belijdenisse” in art. 53 does not include the “Christelijcke Catechismum.” Thus I conclude that the Church Order only prescribed subscription to the Belgic Confession, implying a distinction between CO-1619 and FS-1619.

With relation to the requests of the Remonstrants to revise the confessions, GS Dordrecht decided in its 173rd session not to accede to this request but to remain with what it termed the “sense” of the Gallican and Belgic Confessions of Faith.

CO-1619 art. 53-54

53. The Ministers of the Word of God and likewise the Professors in theology shall subscribe to the Confession of Faith of the Netherlands Churches (which is proper for the other Professors as well), and the Ministers who refuse to do so shall de facto be suspended from their office by the Consistory or Classis until they shall have declared themselves fully in this manner, and if they obstinately persist in refusing, they shall be deposed from their office.

54. Likewise Schoolmasters shall also be held to subscribe the Articles as above, or in their place the Christian Catechism.

Acts GS Dordrecht 1618-19 session 175 (May 25)

Is decided that visitors to the sick will subscribe the Confession, Catechism and Synodical declaration, in the same way as earlier has been ordained for Rectors and Schoolmasters. Whether and how Elders of the churches should subscribe, such is left in the discretion of each classis and synod.

Thus GS Dordrecht 1618-19 not only gave the Dutch Reformed churches their third Reformed confession, the Canons of Dort, but it also provided them with a renewed church order, including a form of subscription. Fanoy traces the introduction of this form in the various provinces, and notes that it was duly adopted by the various ecclesiastical assemblies in the regions. Of particular interest are the course of events in Zuid-Holland, Zeeland, and Friesland.⁶⁵

In Zuid-Holland, objections to FS-1619 arose from classis Dordrecht. The classis felt the form prescribed too much, noting (1) that we may determine ourselves how we will ward off heresy; (2) discussions with professors and other learned men should be permitted before discussion takes place with the church council,

classis or synod; (3) not every particular objection to a point of doctrine should automatically (*ipso facto*) lead to suspension. PS Zuid-Holland (Gouda) 1620 ruled these objections out of order, and FS-1619 was adopted. Whether this decision was motivated by church political principles or by

⁶⁴ On subscription by elders see Ginkel, *Ouderling*, 239-241. For the Dutch text of the forms of subscription and church order articles see the literary section.

⁶⁵ Fanoy, "Ondertekeningformulier", 599-604. On the other hand it should be noted that in the end CO-1619 was only introduced successfully in the provinces of Gelderland, Utrecht and Overijssel; see Van der Zee, *Kerkgeschiedenis*, 20.

FS-1619

We undersigned ministers of the divine Word resorting under the Classis of NAME, declare sincerely and in good conscience before the Lord, by this our subscription, that we from the heart consider and believe that all the articles and points of doctrine contained in this Confession and Catechism of the Reformed Dutch Churches, together with the declaration on some points of aforesaid doctrine made in the National Synod held at Dordrecht in the year 1619 agree in everything with the Word of God. We promise therefore diligently to teach and faithfully to defend aforementioned doctrine without publicly or privately, directly or indirectly teaching or writing anything against this doctrine. We also not only reject all errors contrary to this doctrine namely those condemned by aforementioned Synod, but we also shall refute and oppose them and shall help ward them off. And if at some later time it should happen that we foster any different consideration or sentiment against aforementioned doctrine, we promise that we will neither publicly nor privately propose, drive, preach, or write such a view, but we will first reveal this view to the church council, the Classis and the Synod so that it may be examined, always being ready to submit with a willing spirit to their judgement, under penalty that if we act contrary to this, we are by that very fact suspended from our ministry. But if the consistory, Classis or Synod should ever on account of serious reasons for second thoughts, in order to preserve the unity and purity of doctrine, consider it proper to demand of us that we explain more fully our opinion [about some article of this Confession, Catechism or Synodical declaration], we promise also always by this, to be ready and willing to respond to such a request at all times, under the same penalty stated above, reserving however the right of appeal if we should believe that we have been grieved, during which appeal we will acquiesce in the judgement and determination of the provincial Synod.

civil political fear of further ecclesiastical unrest remains unclear; however, the latter is more likely than the former.⁶⁶

In Zeeland, the question arose whether FS-1619 infringed on the freedom to prophecy. PS Zeeland (Goes) 1620 decided that it did not. Similar objections were subsequently raised in 1622 in Classis Schouwen, but the classis decided to abide by the decision of Goes until a national synod convened that could answer the question. However, since the civil authorities prevented such a synod from convening, the question was never dealt with.⁶⁷

Already by 1619, PS Friesland (Leeuwarden) had adopted both the Canons of Dort and the form of subscription. Later that same year it was reported that all but three Friesian ministers were prepared to subscribe. In 1620, it was reported that two of the three had been suspended and the case of the third was in process. The conclusion is thus warranted that Friesland also ecclesiastically adopted the Three Forms of Unity and subscription thereto. It has for a long time been a point of debate whether the Canons of Dort had been adopted and introduced with the approval of the provincial government. Hovius has made study of this and concludes that in Friesland they were also officially adopted and introduced.⁶⁸

Fanoy's conclusion that FS-1619 was adopted by all provincial churches is warranted. The practice would, in theory, remain unchanged until 1816. Thus GS Dordrecht 1618-19 marks the end of the first period of the development of subscription in Dutch Reformed circles, and can be considered the end product of sixty years of reflection by the Reformed on the place of

⁶⁶ This in turn means that one should not be too quick with accusations of confessionism at the address of the particular synod. The matter was most likely far more complicated.

⁶⁷ Schokking takes it on himself to defend the decision of PS Zeeland (Goes) and Classis Schouwen. See Schokking, *Leertucht*, 209-210; also Mul, "Aard" 243.

⁶⁸ Hovius, "De DL in Friesland",. hus agree with Van der Kemp, *Schets*, 58; Fanoy, "Ondertekeningformulier", 602-603. See further Heringa, *Zeven Stellingen*, 60-61; Royards, *Kerkregt*, 2:124; Scholten, *De Leer*, 52-54. Ypey and Dermout present a course of events with the texts of various decisions. They conclude that a subscription form referring to all three Forms of Unity was subscribed up until 1655. In 1722 PS Friesland (Harlingen) noted that the Canons of Dort were no longer subscribed. Ypey and Dermout believe that the practice of only subscribing the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism dates to PS Friesland (Joure) 1634. (Ypey and Dermout, *Geschiedenis NHK*, 2a:169-175.)

confessions in the structure of the church.⁶⁹

2.2.2.5 CONCLUSION

There is substantial literature on the practice of confessional subscription in Dutch Reformed circles prior to and including GS Dordrecht 1618-19. This material has clearly been written with different motives, yet it is no great endeavour to distil from it the course of events. Lacking in the material is a thorough study into the motives for introducing subscription. It is clear from the decisions of Emden and later synods that the churches subsequently saw subscription as a means to preserve the truth and as a rallying point. The theory developed and articulated at the various synods could not always be enforced due to the frequent intervention of local and regional governments. It was not until the federal government in the person of Prince Maurice chose for the Contra-Remonstrants that the lines could be drawn together, and the first period of reflection on confessional subscription closed with the adoption of FS-1619 by the churches across all provinces.

⁶⁹ Fanoy, "Ondertekeningformulier", 604.

2.3 From GS Dordrecht 1618-19 to Synod The Hague 1816

Dutch historians have long considered the seventeenth century to be the Golden Age of the Dutch Republic, and the eighteenth century to be the colourless century of decline and decay. This somewhat simplistic impression of these two centuries is undergoing revision at the present day. The same applies to ecclesiastical historiography. Just as the seventeenth century historians J. Uytenbogaert and J. Trigland described the history of the Dutch Reformation up to Dordrecht through the glasses of their own convictions, so later historians have lauded or decried the seventeenth century and decried or lauded the eighteenth century. It is as well, then, to tread cautiously with respect to this chequered period of Dutch Reformed church history. All the more so, since even the most basic research on the eighteenth century is far from complete.⁷⁰

The following presents a brief overview of literature relating to confessional subscription produced within and on this period (2.3.1) and then sketches the course of events relevant to confessional subscription during these two hundred years (2.3.2).

2.3.1 LITERATURE

For the first two hundred years after GS Dordrecht 1618-19, confessional subscription was an issue subjected to censorship. Though the issue of civil toleration was much discussed, any discussion of ecclesiastical toleration, i.e. toleration within the walls of a particular association of churches, seems to have been taboo. Hence a bibliography of primary sources on confessional subscription in reformed circles within the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries contrasts sharply in length with a bibliography covering the subsequent two hundred years.⁷¹

Primary publications include publications of the Three Forms of Unity, especially the Canons of Dort or collections including the Canons, since they were the more controversial of the three. Such publications often included a foreword in which the editor or publisher explained the value of these documents.⁷²

Publications of the seventeenth century that address the matter are generally reflective expositions of reformed practice. The works of G. Voetius and W. à Brakel are typical examples. Both defend the necessity of confessions in the church and consider church members bound to them. Voetius considered very proper the practice of promising faithfulness to the confessions with public profession of faith, and at the turn of the century À Brakel stated that a church is known by its doctrine and the holy walk of life of its members. Not reflective but apologetic is J. Trigland's refutation of the Remonstrant position as articulated by J. Uytenbogaert. Here too, one finds a careful defence of Dordrecht. Scripture and confessions are not identical, the former is

⁷⁰ A renewed look at Dutch history began during the 1960s and is as yet far from complete. See Mijnhardt, *Kantelend Geschiedbeeld*, which itself is already considered by some to be outdated. On bias in church histories compare more liberal church histories—such as Ypey and Dermout, *Geschiedenis NHK*; Knappert, *Geschiedenis*, Reitsma and Lindeboom, *Geschiedenis*—with more conservative church histories such—as Vos Az., *Groen van Prinsterer* and Van der Zee, *Kerkgeschiedenis*. The English history of Hansen tends to take a conservative look at things, though he is somewhat more objective with the material. In 1996 Van Rooden claimed that “the religious history of the Netherlands between 1620 and 1815 has not been systematically studied” (Van Rooden, *Religieuze Regimes*, 23). Van Eijnatten, *Liberty and Concord* is one of the first thorough attempts at filling this gap.

⁷¹ See Berkvens-Stevelinck, Israel, and Posthumus Meyes, *Emergence of Tolerance*; Van Eijnatten, *Stinstra Affair*; Van Eijnatten, *Liberty and Concord*. On the relationship between civil and ecclesiastical toleration, especially on how the two were referenced during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see Van Eijnatten, *Stinstra Affair*, 7-21. When I speak of “ecclesiastical toleration” I am referring to toleration as it was exercised within the bounds of a church (not between churches) and, in the context of this study, within the bounds of the Reformed Church.

⁷² J. Vree has done research into this matter which has not (yet) been published. He allowed me to look at this research and note it here. Vree discovered that, aside from several editions dating to 1619 there is only one later publication of the Canons dating to the seventeenth century (1628). During the eighteenth century he has found seven publications (1725, 1747, 1752, 1772, 1780, [1780], and 1788). The first publication during the nineteenth century dates to 1833. Some of these publications included a shortened version of the Canons.

the standard for the truth, the latter is the standard for unity in doctrine. With respect to the matter of substantive or essential binding, Trigland refers to a work of J. Acontius, who argued that all that is contained in the confessions should be of an essential character, implying a substantive binding to confessions.⁷³

Publications within the eighteenth century generally find their origin in situations of conflict. Debates on confessional subscription within reformed circles around the first half of the century generally involved the Leiden professor J. van den Honert. He began writing on the issue during the late 1720s while debating with two Remonstrants and a Lutheran on issues relating to the Canons of Dort. Subsequently, the issue was specifically discussed when the Mennonite Rev. J. Stinstra of Harlingen claimed confessional subscription to be improper. In 1745, Van den Honert held a lecture on toleration in which the matter of confessional subscription was also discussed; interestingly, this lecture, reprinted in 1747 and again in 1756, drew no noteworthy response from any quarter. During the late 1740s and early 1750s, a nationwide polemic on confessional subscription erupted around the disciplining of Rev. A. van der Os of Zwolle. To the surprise of his contemporaries and many later historians, the orthodox Van den Honert took it upon himself to defend Van der Os; in this Van den Honert was supported by his somewhat controversial colleague in Leiden, Prof. J. J. Schultens. On the other side stood the deputies of Classis Zwolle, especially Rev. N. Holtius of Koudewater and Rev. A. Comrie of Woubrugge. The Van der Os case appears to have been the first time since GS Dordrecht 1618-19 that confessional subscription was openly debated within Dutch Reformed circles. As such, it was the first internal Reformed polemic on ecclesiastical toleration since GS Dordrecht 1618-19. During the second half of the eighteenth century there were at least two other prominent debates. During the late 1760s and early 1770s, a sharp disagreement on the propriety of confessional subscription and the boundaries of the church developed between the Groninger jurist H. Goodricke and the professors G. Bonnet (Utrecht) and D. van der Kemp (Leiden). Also during the early 1770s the Groninger professor of law F. A. van der Marck challenged the propriety of confessional subscription.⁷⁴

There are very few secondary sources to draw on in relation to confessional subscription. Studies that restrict themselves to one of the debates referred to above will be noted in the following section. A number of biographies address the issue, but always from the perspective of the person being studied, thereby liable to being a one-sided presentation. There are few studies that can compare with the secondary literature listed in 2.2.1., exceptions are the overview presented by H. H. Donker Curtius (1834) in which he sets out to show that FS-1619 did not function, and the very recent study on toleration in the Netherlands during eighteenth century by J. van Eijnatten.⁷⁵ Fiolet finds it sufficient to mention the names of some leading theologians who created room for a spirit of tolerance in the NHK. Curiously, the issue of confessional subscription is rarely addressed in the many studies of toleration on Dutch soil during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. General church histories do reference the various discussions but are not very useful for the

⁷³ Voetius, *Kerk*, 16.—Brakel, *Redelijke Godsdienst*, 564.—Trigland, *Geschiedenissen*, 437-440.—Trigland only references Acontius (without even naming the work) and does not quote him. I believe Trigland was referring to *Stratagematum Satanae Libri VIII*, written in 1564 and translated into French, Dutch, German and English. The Dutch translations were published in 1611, 1624 and 1660. The English editions were published by John Maycock of London in 1648 and 1651 (thus De Vleeschauwer, *De Methodo*, 57-58). The matter of confessions is discussed in book VII “On defamation”. I have read the material in Dutch translation as found in Acontius, *Arglistigheden*, 581-621.—Van Eijnatten discusses S. van Til’s *Salems vrede*, of which he writes: “According to [the ground maxim of Christ’s Kingdom], peace should not be disrupted or the unity of the church destroyed if the differences at issue are not fundamental. The fundamental doctrine (*grond-Leere*) is summarised in the three Forms of Unity, which are not subject to change, since it has been shown after much study that they contain the truth.” (Van Eijnatten, *Liberty and Concord*, 26-33; the quote is from page 29).

⁷⁴ For literature see Janssen, *Statisch of Dynamisch?*

⁷⁵ One might also add here Heringa, *Zeven Stellingen*, 51-88; this is a much briefer and eclectic overview.

present purposes, tending to be too brief and focused more on the events than on the contents of the debate. Moreover, on account of the likelihood of ulterior motives, their representation of the facts may not always be entirely reliable.⁷⁶

2.3.2 CONFESSIONAL SUBSCRIPTION

Although the Calvinist church aimed at a strictly presbyterial polity, the governments of the various regions of the Dutch Republic were keen to ‘keep a finger in the pie’. Hence the political and reformed ecclesiastical histories of the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are so interwoven as to be inseparable.⁷⁷

Because of its marked influence on the course of events surrounding confessional reflection, the following section (2.3.2.1) briefly sketches the political history of the Dutch Republic. Thereafter the focus is on the ecclesiastical situation of the Reformed church, particularly with respect to doctrine (2.3.2.2), and specifically on confessional subscription (2.3.2.3).

2.3.2.1 POLITICAL HISTORY⁷⁸

Prior to the seventeenth century, the Low Countries were a loosely connected group of regions: a duchy, and counties and provinces that were variously allied to the powers of the day. Under the leadership of William of Orange, the Low Countries became independent from the sovereignty of the Spanish King Philip II. In 1579, a number of regions of the Low Countries formed an alliance in the Union of Utrecht. The Union expanded as more and more regions were liberated from the yoke of Spain. This treaty formed the basis of the Dutch Republic until 1795.

In essence, the Union was a federation of independent regions.⁷⁹ The regions were governed by the “States” (“*Staten*”) who appointed persons known collectively as “Delegated States” (“*Gedeputeerde Staten*”) or “Commissioned Councils” (“*Gecommitteerde Raden*”) for the day-to-day government of the region.⁸⁰ The States each appointed a “*stadholder*” for discharging responsibilities related to the political process and administration of justice, who usually was commander-in-chief of the army and navy also.⁸¹ The federal government consisted of delegates from the States of the seven key provinces,⁸² and was referred to as the “States General” (“*Staten*

⁷⁶ On bias in biographies see Van den Berg’s criticism of Van den End’s presentation of the debate between Bonnet, Van der Kemp and Goodricke in his biography of Bonnet (Van den Berg, “Tussen Ideaal en Realiteit” 217).—Donker Curtius, “Werking”; Van Eijnatten, *Liberty and Concord*—Fiolet, *Onrust*, 12. The following ten pages of the introduction are then spent on discussing the backgrounds to the Supernaturalists, the theology which many church leaders held in the early nineteenth century.—Confessional subscription or ecclesiastical toleration is discussed in specialised studies such as Van Eijnatten, *Stinstra Affair* and Fix, *Bekker*. However, I am rather surprised that Fix makes no mention of the form of subscription. For an extensive study of toleration during the eighteenth century and suggestions as to why ecclesiastical toleration was not an issue see Van Eijnatten, *Liberty and Concord*.—With respect to the accuracy of church histories compare the reports on the Van der Os case in a liberal and an orthodox church history.

⁷⁷ This is clearly illustrated by William III’s refusal to convoke a national synod to decide in the Voetian-Coceian debate; and discipline cases such as that involving Rev. B. Bekker of Amsterdam during the late seventeenth century and Rev. A. van der Os of Zwolle during the mid-eighteenth century. Bosch even concluded that the Van der Os case was just as much a question of the relationship church-state as it was a matter of doctrinal discipline (Bosch, *Van der Os*, 10).

⁷⁸ For an orientation see Price, *Dutch Republic*. For a detailed history see Israel, *Dutch Republic*.

⁷⁹ See Te Brake, “Provincial Histories” 65.

⁸⁰ For simplicity’s sake I will follow the Dutch custom of referring to all these bodies as “Deputied States.” The Commissioned Councils were found in the two provinces of Holland and Zeeland. Gelderland, which consisted of four “Quarters,” had “Deputied States” for three of its Quarters.

⁸¹ On the role and history of stadholders in the Dutch Republic see Rowen, *Princes of Orange*.

⁸² In order of rank: Gelderland, Holland, Zeeland, Utrecht, Friesland, Overijssel and Groningen (Israel, *Dutch Republic* 292).—Drenthe thus had no representation in the States General. The province of Holland was considered a whole, though reference is often made to its three “quarters”: Zuid-Holland, Noord-Holland, and West-Friesland.

Historical Part

Generaal").⁸³ A measure of religious freedom was enshrined in article 13 of the Union, each region being able to decide for itself which religion was to be dominant and how other religions might be practised.⁸⁴ Many provincial governments forced the Reformed church in their constituency to adopt the church order of their preference.

The period between Dordrecht 1618-19 and 1795 (the year in which oligarchy was replaced with a form of representative government) was marked by a struggle between provincialism and federalism. On the one hand, there were the urban patricians, the "States party", who opposed the appointment of stadholders and advocated decentralized government, On the other hand there were those who favoured the appointment of stadholders, usually one and the same person for many if not all the provinces. Since the stadholders were invariably appointed from the house of Orange, this political ideal became known as "Orangism." Historians suggest that the Orangists favoured the Reformed religion of Dordrecht, whereas the States party tended to be somewhat heterodox.⁸⁵ The stadholders had the upper hand from Dordrecht until 1650, then again from 1672-1702.⁸⁶ Between 1650 and 1672, and between 1702 and 1747, the stadholders (especially the house of Orange) were less in power.⁸⁷ The stadholders were strong after 1747. During the early 1780s, a third party, the Patriots, formed alongside the States party and Orangists. The Patriots rapidly gained influence, and the invasion of Prussian forces in 1787-88 was necessary to restore power to the house of Orange. However, in 1795 French forces occupied key cities in the Republic, and the Oranges were forced to flee.⁸⁸

The period 1795-1813 is generally referred to as the French period. The Patriots saw their opportunity to establish the Batavian Republic. Government was centralized and the country was divided into a number of departments with complete disregard for old boundaries. Due to French intrigues and the ambitions of Napoleon, the Netherlands experienced twenty years of political instability. With the impending defeat of Napoleon, William VI (son of the last stadholder, William V of Orange) returned to Dutch shores. In 1814, a constitution was adopted, and revised in 1815. This served for the next thirty years or so, reshaping the old federation into a constitutional monarchy with the crowning of William of Orange, son of Stadholder William V of Orange, as King William I.⁸⁹

⁸³ The *GWPE* (s.v. "Staten-Generaal") notes that the States General, the federal government, governed more in appearance than in reality. Each of the provinces had the power of veto.—The Dutch '*staten*' is derived from the term "*standen*" or "*stenden*," "status" or "state of life." Originally the States consisted of the three states of life: the nobility, the clergy, and the landowners. Interestingly the same term is also the root for the Dutch word for town or city: *stad* (pl. *steden*). During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the clergy played no role and the knights a minimal role, the urban patriciate had the upper hand.—For an history of Dutch political government see Israel, *Dutch Republic*, 276-306.

⁸⁴ On religion in the Union of Utrecht see De Jong, "Unie en Religie" The other main religious currents in The Netherlands were: Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, Mennonitism, Remonstrantism, and Judaism.

⁸⁵ See Price, *Dutch Republic*, 82-83; Israel, *Dutch Republic*, 608 links the States party to the remonstrant H. Grotius and the Orangists to the Calvinist G. Voetius.

⁸⁶ During this second period the stadholderate took on more monarchical aspects. In Holland and Zeeland the stadholderate was even declared hereditary. However, William III and Mary (who were of course monarchs in England) had no children, and thus a second stadholder-free period ensued.

⁸⁷ In many histories one reads of two Dutch stadholder-less periods. Strictly speaking this does not apply to Friesland and Groningen, which were never without stadholder, Drenthe, which lacked a stadholder only between 1702 and 1722, and Gelre (Gelderland), whose two stadholder-less periods did not match those of Holland and Zeeland.

⁸⁸ For a more in depth orientation see, in addition to the works noted in note 78, Jacob and Mijnhardt, *Dutch Republic*, 19-120.

⁸⁹ Hence there is a double numbering of Williams of Orange in Dutch history. The first Williams I-V of Orange were stadholders. Thus far the Netherlands has had three King Williams (the present crown-prince will probably become King William IV).

2.3.2.2 THE ECCLESIASTICAL SITUATION⁹⁰

This subsection describes the ecclesiastical situation of the Dutch Reformed churches during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The focus is particularly on various theological lights as they waxed and waned, insofar as these directly related to the matter of confessional subscription.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the public (or ‘privileged’) church in the provinces was the Reformed Church, then generally known as the *Gereformeerde Kerk*. On account of the political constitution of the nation, there were in fact nine separate associations of churches, most having their own church order. Although these communities of churches had assembled at the General Synod of Dordrecht in 1618-19, it took until 1650 for a proper inter-provincial ecclesiastical correspondence to arise. Even then, the churches in Groningen were not properly involved until around 1720, and the churches in Zeeland and Drenthe never participated. Among other things, this fragmented approach meant that discipline applied in one region did not necessarily have consequences in another.⁹¹

Between Dordrecht 1618-19 and The Hague 1816, the church was very much ‘under the thumb’ of the civil government, even during the French period when church and state were officially entirely separate. This is clearly borne out by the fact that the theological faculties were run by the civil governments. The Dutch Republic had five such faculties: Leiden in Holland (1575-today), Franeker in Friesland (1585-1843), Groningen in Groningen (1614-today), Utrecht in Utrecht (1636-today), and Harderwijk in Gelderland (1647-1818). Theology was also taught at several other academies. Of the five theological faculties, that of Franeker was especially known for its progressive character, being a stronghold of Cartesian Rationalism. Leiden also occasionally harboured scholars considered less orthodox.⁹²

Theologically, the period 1620-1651 was a period of consolidation and scholastic dogmatics. The decisions of Dordrecht were enforced, and the deposition of many Remonstrant ministers and professors meant that for a while Calvinist theologians were most influential. The hundred and fifty years thereafter were very diverse, with various forms of heterodoxy appearing on the scene. One author characterizes this diverse nature as the result of the resurgence of an “anti-confessionalist party” in the Dutch Reformed church, which had waned with the Remonstrants but now waxed with the Cocceians and Cartesians—one should probably add, the Spinozists. At the root of the controversies between the orthodox and the heterodox during these years were epistemological matters concerning knowledge of the truth; specifically, how one should characterize the testimony of Scripture, and the debate between rationalism and empiricism. Furthermore, among a large number of ministers there was a tendency to attempt to read the Bible objectively, i.e. without being preconditioned by Reformed dogmatics. Finally, pietism and mysticism arose in reaction to continued immorality and in reaction to scholasticism. Although in

⁹⁰ For an orientation see Selderhuis, *Kerkgeschiedenis*, 466-482.

⁹¹ Strictly speaking this position of public church across the Republic was achieved in 1651. Demographic studies suggest that even in the northern provinces the Reformed were not an absolute majority; see Knippenberg, *Religieuze kaart van Nederland*, 22ff.; Duke, *Reformation and Revolt*, 269-270.—The nine “associations” were: Noord-Holland, Zuid-Holland, Zeeland, Utrecht, Gelderland, Overijssel, Friesland, Groningen and Drenthe. Curiously, the province of Holland was a single political entity but divided ecclesiastically into two synods (Israel, *Dutch Republic*, 367).—In Zeeland the authorities prohibited the meeting of provincial synods after 1638 and thus the only major assembly was the classis. In Zeeland Classis Walcheren functioned somewhat as a *prima inter pares*. In Drenthe, which was properly speaking not a province, synods were limited to once every three years and the authorities prohibited contact with churches elsewhere.—An example, of inconsistent discipline is the case of Rev. J. vander Waeyen. In 1676-1677 Vander Waeyen was deposed as minister in Zeeland and subsequently appointed professor of theology in Friesland (on events prior to this discipline see Van Sluis, “Van der Wayen”).

⁹² On the theological faculties in The Netherlands (not only the reformed ones) see Sepp, *Proeve* and Sepp, *Godgeleerd Onderwijs*. On the early period of the faculty of Leiden see Eekhof, *Leiden*. On Leiden and Franeker see Van den Berg, “Franeker and Leiden”

name there was but one Reformed Church, it formed a landscape through which many different currents flowed. The following may be noted as the more important currents.⁹³

The *theologia traditiva* had its roots in sixteenth century Calvinism, especially the line of Beza. This current was moderate with respect to morals, and some of its adherents advocated a moderate Episcopalian church polity. Eventually these Traditionalists became part of the Voetian current, with whom they shared a common opponent. The **Voetians**, named after the Utrecht professor G. Voetius, formed the more conservative current in the Reformed Church. They were more pietist than the Traditionalists and advocated a strict Presbyterian church polity. Their opponents, the **Cocceians**, named after the Leiden professor J. Cocceius, formed a more progressive current in the Reformed Church and were occasionally accused of Amyraldism. The most important difference lay in the relationship between the Old and New Testaments: Voetians advocated the continued authority of various elements of the Old Testaments while Cocceians considered the Old Testament laws fulfilled and thus irrelevant in the New Testament dispensation. This difference became very visible in the respective views on the Sabbath: the Voetians argued for strict observance, but the Cocceians did not. Other prominent differences related to politics and exegesis. In politics, Voetians were invariably Orangists, whereas Cocceians were generally inclined to the States party faction; in exegesis Voetians were scholastic and dogmatic, whereas Cocceians advocated Christological allegory. The debate between the Voetians and Cocceians took on extreme forms, to the extent that during the “reign” of Stadholder William III, the Voetians attempted to convene a national synod at which the Cocceians could be judged. William III was not prepared to go that far, however.⁹⁴

With respect to the seventeenth century, mention should also be made of the *Nadere Reformatie* (Dutch Puritanism), a current parallel to mid-seventeenth century Puritanism in England and late seventeenth century Pietism in Germany. Members of this cross current could be Voetian or Cocceian, though most tended to be Voetians. *Nadere Reformatie* people reacted against what they perceived to be dead orthodoxy and moral apostasy in the church. Some turned their back on the church or were excommunicated; others remained in the church but held their own meetings, known as conventicles. Their pietism often combined a degree of mysticism.⁹⁵

Study of theological currents in Dutch Reformed circles during the eighteenth century is far from complete, resulting in a certain superficiality. During the first half of that century, Voetians and Cocceians became more conciliatory. Most historians speak of the development of a new current, generally referred to as that of the **Tolerants**. Dogmatically, these Tolerants advocated a diverse spectrum of ideas and were united in the thought that there should be room for such diversity. At times, this brought the Tolerants in conflict with the orthodox Reformed. In general, the Tolerants preferred the Biblical approach of Cocceians to the dogmatic approach of Voetians. This meant that Tolerants, through renewed study of Scripture, sometimes undermined the proof-texts for various doctrines. The *Nadere Reformatie* found continuity in a pietism or experientialism under German influences. During the last decades of the eighteenth century, the **Supernaturalists** might be identified as a separate current. Supernaturalism developed as a reaction to strict rationalism (or naturalism), which denied the existence of all things not observable or verifiable. Rationalism was a line of thought especially prevalent among Remonstrant and Mennonite theologians. In contrast,

⁹³ On confessionalism and anti-confessionalism see Fix, *Bekker*, 127-149.—My guide in reviewing the various theological currents has been Van den Berg, "Stroomlandschap"

⁹⁴ On Voetians and Cocceians see Broeyer and Van der Wall, *Richtingenstrijd*. On William III see Bots, "William III"

⁹⁵ On the *Nadere Reformatie* in general see Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, 383-413 and *FTNR*. On the definition of the *Nadere Reformatie* and its relationship to English Puritanism and German Pietism see Graafland, Op 't Hof, and Van Lieburg, *Nadere Reformatie*; Van den Berg, "Frömmigkeitsbestrebungen" 57-61. Graafland *cum suis* consider "Pietism" to be broader than the *Nadere Reformatie*, arguing the two are different phenomena with much overlap (p. 117). What sets the *Nadere Reformatie* apart from other Pietist currents are the fact that it was typically Dutch and strictly Calvinist (p. 123).—On conventicles see Van Rijswijk, *Poorten Sions*.

Supernaturalists argued that that which is beyond reason need not necessarily be contrary to reason, and thus attempted to defend Reformed doctrine.⁹⁶

In short, there was nominally one Reformed Church in the Republic. In practice, it consisted of provincial associations of churches each with their own church order. Though the churches held in common at least two of the Reformed Confessions (the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism), there were within its walls various theological currents, not always equally orthodox-reformed.

2.3.2.3 CONFSSIONAL SUBSCRIPTION⁹⁷

The foregoing information serves as a framework for the history which is the special interest of this present study, that of confessional subscription. The following sections briefly look at a number of decrees relating to confessional subscription, indicative of government influence in the matter (2.3.2.3.1). Then a study of how confessional subscription functioned in the churches is considered, illustrated with a number of discipline cases (2.3.2.3.2). Subsequently there is a review of three debates on the practice of confessional subscription which took place after 1740 among Reformed academics and ministers (2.3.2.3.3). The final section, (2.3.2.3.4), comments on confessional reflection during the French period.

2.3.2.3.1 *The Civil Authorities Enforce Subscription*

The Arminian Controversy was not merely an ecclesiastical matter: it had also had political ramifications. As a result, and in keeping with neighbouring civil states, the States General were very concerned about preventing renewed religious unrest. Therefore, for the well-being of the state and the peace in the church, they decided on July 2, 1619, to bind not just the church but “the provinces, office bearers, and judges” to the judgment of GS Dordrecht, to maintain and defend its decisions, and not to entertain changes of any sort. This is a prime example of confessional subscription as religio-political binding. It meant, among other things, that persons occupying government positions would have to belong to the Reformed Church and uphold the Reformed confessions. When Stadholder William II died, the seven States assembled in 1651 in the “Great Assembly” to decide on the future of the Republic. Among other things, the States issued a decree stating that the Reformed Religion was to be maintained unchanged. It was with this decree that the Reformed Religion was officially declared to be the religion of the federation, although it did not imply that the Reformed Church had become a state church (i.e. an established church). In 1694, a similar decree was passed by the States of Holland and West-Friesland, instigated by the vehement polemics between Voetians and Cocceians. It prescribed subscription to the Three Forms of Unity (listed by name) for ministers and professors in theology. The decree warned that ministers and professors were not permitted in any way to disturb the peace by vehemently discussing points of doctrine “left in the middle” by the confessions.⁹⁸

2.3.2.3.2 *The Practice of Confessional Subscription*

In the churches, too, there was concern about subscription. However, to what extent there was acquaintance with the confessions is a legitimate question. For example, on April 5, 1746, Classis Appingedam decided to request PS Groningen to publish the Canons of Dort as appendages to the

⁹⁶ O. J. de Jong distinguishes the following three currents for the period mid-to-late-eighteenth century: enlightened-critical, rational-defensive, and experiential-differentiating (De Jong, *Kerkgeschiedenis*, 277). Van Eijnatten refers to the Tolerants as the Franeker or Vitringian School and considers it to be a particular form of Cocceianism (Van Eijnatten, *Liberty and Concord*, 71-89). Because Supernaturalism was the overruling current in the early nineteenth century more attention will be paid to it in the following section.

⁹⁷ For a more detailed study see Van Eijnatten, *Liberty and Concord*, 60-122.

⁹⁸ On the consequences of 1651 see De Visser, *Kerk en Staat*, 1:280-304. On the consequences of 1694 see De Visser, *Kerk en Staat*, 2:333.—On political confessionalisation in the Netherlands see Fix, *Bekker*, 83-149 and Van Eijnatten, *Liberty and Concord*, 15-16.

Bible and Form-books so that people might become more acquainted with them, since Dutch editions of the Canons were especially hard to come by. PS Groningen unanimously approved the request and by June of the same year a separate publication of the Canons appeared.⁹⁹

One historian remarks that the *analogia fidei* had become an *analogia confessionis*. The situation even became such that office bearers in the church accused of heterodoxy wrote commentaries on the Belgic Confession in order to prove their orthodoxy. It thus seemed as if all forces, ecclesiastical and political, were bent on maintaining the Reformed doctrine outlined in the Three Forms of Unity. However, some have felt that subscription had become a formality. The publications of many nominally Reformed theologians clearly expounded ideas contrary to those found in the confessions. A nineteenth-century author even alleged that ministers subscribing the forms in Friesland believed they were entering their name in a registry of ministers. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that many magistrates were not particularly favourable towards the Reformed faith. Their intentions for enforcing and maintaining the Forms unchanged was, as the States of Holland and West-Friesland had openly declared, the maintenance of peace and order. Thus their interest in confessional subscription was one of form and procedure and not one related to the substance of the confession. This explains why ecclesiastical endeavours to discipline those deviating from Reformed doctrine were frequently thwarted by magistrates.¹⁰⁰

By means of a number of the more well known cases, the practice of doctrinal discipline during this period is illustrated below.

In 1666, Rev. J. de Labadie was installed in the Walloon Church of Middelburg, Zeeland. However, his ministry was surrounded by all manner of controversy, and as early as 1667 he was suspended from office for refusing to abide by the church order. Government interference ensured he was restored to office. Yet further controversies resulted in De Labadie being suspended again in 1668, together with his church council. De Labadie then began organizing conventicles, which led to his exile from Middelburg in 1669. Curiously, he left Middelburg with an attestation of soundness in doctrine and walk of life. In his wake the Labadist movement developed, which is regarded as one of the most extreme forms of pietism found within the *Nadere Reformatie*.¹⁰¹

In 1680, Rev. P. van Hattem of Middelburg, often associated with Spinozism but more likely an independent thinker, was asked by the classis of St. Philipsland to write an explanation of his teachings on sin and atonement. The classis judged these were sufficient to accuse him of heterodoxy, and deposed him. Due to involvement of the civil authorities and faculties of Leiden and Utrecht, it took until 1683 before Van Hattem was actually deposed. Like De Labadie, Van Hattem and his followers then established conventicles.¹⁰²

Rev. B. Bekker of Amsterdam, an independent thinker, wrote a book entitled *The World Bewitch'd* in which he drew the existence of the spiritual world into question, as a result of which he was deposed in 1692. Although the Amsterdam magistrates did not challenge this decision, they continued to pay Bekker his stipend and refused to provide finances to fill the vacancy left by Bekker.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ *Canones Synodi Dordracenae*, foreword:4-5. This publication is the third Dutch edition of the Canons to appear after the initial publications of 1629.

¹⁰⁰ Van de Sandt, *Alberti*, 113.—On the writing of commentaries see Te Water, *Eeuw-getyde*, 165. On Bekker's stance with respect to the confessions see Fix, *Bekker*, 142, 145ff. See further [Hofstede de Groot], *Gedachten*, 57; Royaards, *Kerkregt*, 2:131 (who speaks of "thoughtless subscription"), and Uit den Bogaard, "Godsdienstig Leven" 328. The relationship between the civil governments and the Reformed church is described by Fix with the term "adversarial" and considered by him to be one of the causes for resistance to confessionalism (Fix, *Bekker*, 145).

¹⁰¹ On Labadism see Saxby, *Labadists*.

¹⁰² See Van Eijnatten, *Liberty and Concord*, 36-38.

¹⁰³ On Bekker see Fix, *Bekker*. His biographer in *BLGNP* comments that his father's advise never to look through the eyes of another became his life-motto. An English translation (based on the French translation) was published in

It is worth adding the events during the 1680s and early 1690s associated with Prof. H. A. Roëll of Franeker, an adherent of Cartesianism, and Rev. J. Vlak of Zutphen. Both were accused of heterodoxy but never fully disciplined. Roëll, accused of denying the Trinity and the Reformed doctrine of atonement, was forced to sign five articles in which he stated his faith on certain points and promised not to teach his deviating views. Vlak was accused of denying the full extent of the atonement of Christ and of teaching a type of justification by works. Vlak's ideas were discussed several times by various classes, but he was never disciplined for them. However, one classis in the Dutch Republic, Classis Walcheren in Zeeland, became deeply concerned about the emergence of heterodoxy, and in 1693, in anticipation of a general synod that could decide on the matter, this classis drafted five articles against the teachings of Bekker, Roëll, and Vlak. Though not intended to be a Fourth Form of Unity, all ministers serving in the Classis Walcheren were obliged to subscribe the Walcheren Articles along with the Three Forms of Unity. This practice continued right up to the introduction of the *Algemeen Reglement* in 1816.¹⁰⁴

*With respect to the status of the Walcheren Articles, the introductory paragraph to the articles unequivocally states that they are not intended as a confession. Moreover, in contrast with the Canons of Dort, which only referred to Scripture, the Walcheren Articles quote and reference the Three Forms of Unity as freely as Scripture. Uit den Boogaard does the Articles an injustice by suggesting that they set out to "prove" various doctrines from the decisions of Dordrecht, the confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and with bible texts. References to the confessional standards need have been no more than to prove that a particular doctrine was taught by the church.*¹⁰⁵

Finally, in 1708 PS Overijssel deposed Rev. F. van Leenhof of Zwolle for Spinozism. Nevertheless, the church council and magistrate of Zwolle refused to recognize this decision and were themselves placed under censure. Van Leenhof voluntarily laid down his office in 1710, but in 1711 he still argued that he had taught nothing contrary to the Three Forms of Unity.¹⁰⁶

The foregoing discipline cases illustrate two things. Firstly, a large proportion of Reformed office bearers took their duty to defend reformed doctrine seriously and sought to have apparent deviants tried by ecclesiastical assemblies. Secondly, the civil authorities were bent on maintaining peace and order, frequently stifling debate on an issue, and at times supporting those who had been ecclesiastically tarred as doctrinal deviants. With respect to both can be discerned a drive that seeks to maintain the *status quo*: ecclesiastically, a drive to maintain the doctrinal *status quo*; politically, a drive to maintain the social *status quo*. Such an environment was clearly not conducive to reflection on the propriety and practice of confessional subscription.

2.3.2.3.3 Reflection on Confessional Subscription¹⁰⁷

Sometime during the 1740s, reflection on confessional subscription did appear in the public sphere. The central figure in the earlier eighteenth century debates was J. van den Honert, professor of theology in Utrecht from 1727 and in Leiden from 1734. During the 1720s, Van den Honert defended the substantive binding as prescribed by GS Dordrecht 1618-19 against a Lutheran and two Remonstrant ministers. A decade later, Van den Honert became involved in another debate in which confessional subscription played an important role. This time the issue was specifically raised in a sermon preached by the Mennonite Rev. J. Stinstra of Harlingen, Friesland. Van den Honert again defended the traditional Reformed stance. In 1745, Van den Honert gave a lecture on toleration in which the matter of confessional subscription was dealt with.

London 1695 under the title *The world bewitch'd; or, an examination of the common opinions concerning spirits ... Divided into four parts.*

¹⁰⁴ On Roëll see Van Sluis, *Roëll*, 86-98.

¹⁰⁵ Uit den Bogaard, "Godsdienstig Leven" A dissertation on the Walcheren Articles is being prepared at this moment by J. W. Veltkamp.

¹⁰⁶ It was not until 1716, four years after the death of Van Leenhof, that the censure of Zwolle was lifted.

¹⁰⁷ See Janssen, *Statisch of Dynamisch?*

Historical Part

At first impression it would seem that the vehement apologist for Dordrecht had changed his mind, but careful reading and analysis of this lecture suggests that Van den Honert had not strayed from defending a substantive binding within the confines of the Reformed Church.¹⁰⁸

In the late 1740s, a new discussion on confessional subscription arose. In Zwolle, the young Rev. A. van der Os had ruffled many orthodox feathers by adopting a less dogmatic, more exegetical preaching style, leading to non-standard explanations of various texts. His three older colleagues charged him with heterodoxy, and the church council of Zwolle decided to discipline Van der Os. However, the magistrates of Zwolle took Van der Os under their protection. Subsequently, the classis decided that Van der Os had to be deposed, but the States of Overijssel warned the classis not to undertake any action. Then Stadholder William IV demanded that the church council comply with the wishes of the magistrate. At this stage, the faculties of Franeker (especially the Tolerant H. Venema) and Leiden (especially the Cocceian J. van den Honert and Tolerant J. J. Schultens) became involved. Leiden drafted three articles which the five ministers of Zwolle were to subscribe. Van der Os and a younger colleague did so; the older ministers, fearful of what subscription might imply, refused. In 1752, the States of Overijssel again warned the classis not to deal with the matter. In the meantime, the churches of Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam and Utrecht expressed their support for the church council of Zwolle. Thus the issue took on broader significance. On November 19, 1752, the matter took a new turn. During a sermon, Van der Os unequivocally questioned the propriety of confessional subscription. An older colleague, Rev. W. van Zutphen, had taken notes during the service and challenged the correctness of Van der Os' views. Subsequent discrepancies between Van der Os' published version of the sermon and the notes of the older minister exacerbated the issue, and a massive pamphlet war broke out. The two Leiden professors, Schultens and Van den Honert, took it upon themselves to defend Van der Os against the deputies of the Classis Zwolle. Part of this debate developed into a broader discussion on ecclesiastical tolerance, in which Schultens locked horns with two village ministers, N. Holtius and A. Comrie, both staunch defenders of the faith professed by GS Dordrecht 1618-19. In the meantime, disciplinary action against Van der Os continued. In 1753 and 1754, PS Zuid-Holland formulated decisions on how and why confessional subscription should be maintained, and PS Overijssel made grateful use of these. On April 26, 1754, Van der Os was properly deposed by the classis, a decision confirmed by PS Overijssel on June 18, 1755. The polemics continued, especially those between Holtius and Comrie on the one hand, and now Van den Honert on the other. Van den Honert was forced to desist when the States of Overijssel imposed a fine of 100 guilders on any author writing on the issue. Comrie and Holtius, who were writing anonymously, continued their work. When they blackened Van den Honert's name in 1758 (Van den Honert had just passed away), the publication of their *Examination* was forced to cease. And so the debate came to an abrupt end. A chronicler of this saga, R. Bosch, notes that subsequent to this case, ecclesiastical bodies paid stricter attention to the allegiance of office bearers to the Canons of Dort.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ On Van den Honert see Van den Berg, "Van den Honert"; Van Eijnatten, *Stinstra Affair*. Although Van den Honert "reached the pinnacle of the Reformed clerical establishment" in the course of the 1730s, was "a professor of theology at what was still one of the most renowned Protestant universities in Europe" and "the principal authority within the Calvinist church of the 1740s", and was "the most authoritative divine of the period"—thus Van Eijnatten—a study of his life and work has yet to be written.—I have argued in my masters thesis that when it comes to Van den Honert's position, at most one sees a shift in the *grounds* for confessional binding, which I there describe as "from a 'this is a binding to truth' to 'the right of association and disassociation.'" By this I mean that whereas originally confessional subscription was defended on the grounds of the truth of Scripture, it now began to be defended on the grounds of contractarianism. These two lines of defence will resurface in the debates of the nineteenth century.

¹⁰⁹ For the course of events see Bosch, *Van der Os*; for the last comment, p. 158. For the decisions of PS Zuid-Holland see Ypey and Dermout, *Geschiedenis NHK*, IIIa:220-222. The *Examination* by Comrie and Holtius continues to be a much loved work in more conservative, experiential Reformed circles.

Historical Part

Analysis of the various publications in this affair reveals that there were three lines of thought on confessional subscription. In theory, Van den Honert and Schultens defended a substantive subscription as Dordrecht had intended it. Comrie and Holtius did the same, but they differed with the Leiden professors on at least two points: they understood “substance” to cover more than the professors did, and they were prone to reading matters (e.g. supralapsarianism) into the confession. Hence the stance of Comrie and Holtius is open to being caricatured as a literal subscription. The third line of thought, that of an essential subscription, is frequently attributed to Van der Os. However, it is doubtful whether this attribution is accurate: there are too few written records of Van der Os’ position, and some of these contradict each other, such as the published version of his sermon and the notes written by his colleague Van Zutphen mentioned above. Moreover, it was the staunchly orthodox Van den Honert who chose to defend Van der Os and nevertheless unequivocally maintained that his standpoint had not changed at all. This justifies the question: to what extent was Van der Os out of line?¹¹⁰

It would be incorrect to say that the position of an essential binding was not defended within the walls of the Reformed Church. This much is clear from two later debates. During the late 1760s, the Utrecht professor G. Bonnet discussed the matter of confessional subscription in an academic address on tolerance. Around the same time, professor D. van der Kemp gave his inaugural lecture in Leiden on doctrinal and moral deterioration of the church, and how it could be combated with the Three Forms of Unity. Both Bonnet and Van der Kemp defended a substantive binding. The two lectures provoked a response in the form of an anonymous Latin letter, which soon proved to have been penned by H. Goodricke, an English lawyer living in Groningen. Goodricke considered subscription to be unnecessary, and in particular argued that many of the matters for which Dordrecht prescribed subscription were unnecessary. Goodricke believed that the confessions had gained anti-Christian, papal authority and argued they were well overdue for revision. In response, Bonnet and Van der Kemp defended the practice of substantive binding and considered the confessions to be the outline of fundamental doctrines. Goodricke, an advocate of natural law, could only appreciate one of Bonnet’s arguments for binding confessions, that of freedom of association and disassociation. Referring frequently to the works of the Englishmen P. Doddridge and I. Watts, Goodricke defended an essential binding, though he explicitly refused to explain where the line between essential and non-essential lay. The debate petered out because Goodricke accused Bonnet of misunderstanding him, while Bonnet argued that Goodricke had, to begin with, misunderstood him. Van den Berg’s analysis of the debate is that the positions of Van der Kemp and, to a lesser extent, Bonnet, are reminiscent of Dordrecht, whereas Goodricke maintained ideas that would become common during the nineteenth century.¹¹¹

The matter of confessional subscription also played a role in the deposition of F. A. van der Marck, professor of law in Groningen. A professor was a public servant of the state, and thus Van der Marck, even though he was not a professor of theology, had been obliged to sign a form of subscription when taking his position in 1758. Van der Marck taught Roman and Natural Law. Amongst other things, he argued that confessional subscription was only valid within a church because it is an organization of persons; thus confessional subscription bore no relation to truth or salvation. Van der Marck was of the opinion that church dogmas had come into existence as treaties, in essence applying the concept of the social contract to the church. The Groningen professor was convinced that Scripture contained no prescription by Christ or the apostles for a

¹¹⁰ On the problems with determining Van der Os’ position, see Bosch, *Van der Os*, 159-160. For definitions of the terms substantive binding, literal binding and essential binding see 3.4.4.3.1.

¹¹¹ Van den Berg, "Tussen Ideaal en Realiteit" Since I have only read a portion of Bonnet’s work (he is very verbose), I am in no position to judge this analysis. However, that which I have read of Bonnet makes me doubt whether Bonnet was as far removed from the line of Dordrecht as Van den Berg makes him out to be. I further suspect that Van der Kemp, like Holtius and Comrie before him, may have been somewhat overzealous. For a limited review of this debate, see Van den End, *Bonnet*, 44-65.

fixed form of church order. Van der Marck infuriated church leaders when he declared that it would be an honour to help bury the confessions. His stance was that subscription was possible, but only in the sense of an essential binding, and that any religio-political binding was entirely out of order. In 1773, Van der Marck was dismissed on account of his ideas and left the province of Groningen.¹¹²

The foregoing only considered cases of doctrinal discipline. There is, of course, much more to maintenance of the church's doctrine via confessional subscription in the tradition of Dort, such as church visitation, candidate exams, and commentaries on confessions. A study like Schokking's, but covering the period 1619-1816, would be more than welcome.¹¹³

In short, during the course of the eighteenth century, discussion on confessional subscription became more open. The Van der Os case of the late 1740s and 1750s reveals that even Reformed office bearers had differing thoughts on the matter. However, it never came to a fully-fledged debate. Research has yet to be done into why such discussions took place at that particular time, and why they never truly got off the ground. It seems likely that government influence and conformity to the accepted order (a form of traditionalism) played vital roles. It appears that the practice in the churches had deviated considerably from that intended by GS Dordrecht 1618-19.

2.3.2.3.4. The French Period

The 1780s were turbulent years in which there were matters other than confessional subscription to be discussed. Religious equality was legislated and implemented: Van der Marck was re-appointed professor of law in Groningen in 1795. During the French period, reflection on confessional subscription certainly took place, especially in the sphere of those looking at the reorganization of the church. The product of this reflection is evident in the *Algemeen Reglement* of 1816 and forms the starting point for the research of this study.

2.3.3 CONCLUSION

After the hectic debates of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, culminating in the position of GS Dordrecht 1618-19, it is curious to note that between 1619 and 1816 there were only three key debates on confessional subscription within Dutch Reformed circles. Of these three, only the first (the Van der Os case) had ministers on all sides of the table; in the latter two, the stance of Dordrecht was defended by ecclesiastical office bearers against jurists. Doctrinal discipline was practised, but clearly the civil authorities often called the tune to which the church was required to dance. Formally, the governments practised strict maintenance of the Three Forms of Unity. In practice, however, the magistrates used every available means to maintain the peace and remain in control of society, including the church. Open reflection on the propriety and practice of confessional subscription was minimal during these two hundred years. There is evidence to suggest that before 1816 the tendency already existed to deviate from the lines set out by GS Dordrecht 1618-19. Research is yet required to confirm this and, if this proves to have been a general trend, to discover what the underlying reasons for this have been.¹¹⁴

Thus after Dordrecht it was not until the nineteenth century that the Dutch Reformed debate on confessional subscription truly re-opened.

¹¹² See Lindeboom, *Van der Marck*, 49-101 (course of events), 196-205 (van der Marck's teachings); Van Eijnatten, "Noodt" 95-97. It may be worth noting that H. Goodricke achieved his doctorate under F. A. van der Marck.

¹¹³ Schokking, *Leertucht*.—To some extent this study exists, see Van den Broeke, *Geschiedenis van de Classis*, 84-116.

¹¹⁴ Contrary to the ideas of most historians, Van Eijnatten argues that toleration in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century the Netherlands was not so much a matter of idealism but of pragmatism (Van Eijnatten, *Liberty and Concord*). I find his argumentation very plausible, especially since it succeeds more in placing the Republic within the European political and religious context than older studies. See also Van Rooden, *Religieuze Regimes*.

2.4 The Reorganisation of the Church (1816-1831)¹¹⁵

During the mid 1810s a process was initiated which would drastically change the way the NHK was organised. This chapter reviews this reorganization and its first fifteen years of functioning, beginning by reviewing the various theological currents during this period (2.4.1). The introduction of the new form of church government, focusing primarily on the point of doctrinal subscription, is then dealt with (2.4.2). Next are reviewed a number of concerns expressed from within the NHK about the new form of subscription (2.4.3), and several incidents at successive synods that relate to the functioning of doctrine in the reorganized church (2.4.4). Finally, a number of primary publications that relate to reflection on confessional subscription in this period are considered (2.4.5).

2.4.1 THEOLOGICAL CURRENTS IN THE NHK

During the first decades of the nineteenth century, NHK members, including its leading figures, did not really divide into proper schools of thought or currents. Though there were personal allegiances to one or another philosophy or theology, in general the church formed a kaleidoscopic mixture of various convictions content to worship together on the Lord's Day. Within this conglomeration, two currents are of particular interest to this study: Supernaturalism and the Dutch Réveil movement.

Supernaturalism, occasionally referred to as "Rational Supernaturalism" or "Old-liberalism," was a theological system of thought originating roughly in the mid-to-late-eighteenth century. Though it had partly arisen as reaction to Rationalism—Supernaturalists refused to consider reason to be the ultimate source of knowledge of the truth—it had retained the epistemological premises on which Rationalism built. For example, while Supernaturalists (in contrast with Rationalists) accepted the testimony of Scripture, they did not adhere to the inspiration of Scripture, defending instead the self-authentication (*axiopistie*) of Scripture. At first glance, Supernaturalists maintained the confessions. However, they frequently invested orthodox expressions with other meanings. In general, Supernaturalists had a tendency towards intellectualism and dogmatism. Continued emphasis on Rationalist methodology eventually eroded away their convictions concerning traditional doctrines.¹¹⁶

The **Réveil** was a movement of primarily Reformed upper-class non-theologians. It began in Amsterdam with a small circle of disillusioned church members gathered around the poet W. Bilderdijk, a fervent Orangist. A second circle formed in The Hague. This movement took its example from the Réveil movement in Switzerland, and is commonly referred to as the Dutch Réveil. Its primary purpose became to sound the clarion call to awaken the church to doctrinal and ethical orthodoxy. Through study, adherents became convinced that the confessions of the NHK reiterated the truths of Scripture. In general, adherents of the Réveil maintained orthodox Calvinist doctrines, although they preferred to emphasize faith experience over doctrine. Their inspiration was drawn in part from Pietist movements in England and Germany, as well as in the *Nadere Reformatie* on own soil. The Réveil gave spiritual birth to many of the nineteenth century's Dutch defenders of the traditional Reformed faith.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ For general church historical overviews see Hansen, *Reformed Church*, 288-299; Volger, *Leer*, 22-29, 37-47; Reitsma and Lindeboom, *Geschiedenis*, 217-430; Rasker, *De NHK vanaf 1795*, 26-44. For further English materials see De Jong, "Darkness" Van Oene, *Patrimony Profile*, 9-26.

¹¹⁶ On Supernaturalism in general see Sepp, *Proeve*, 125-305, who groups it with "*leerstellige godgeleerdheid*" ("doctrinal divinity"); Haitjema, *Richtingen*, 19-25; Roessingh, *Moderne Theologie*, 12-28. There are no comprehensive recent studies on this theological current. An introduction of sorts is given in Vree, "Dominating Theology" On the orthodoxy of Supernaturalism in form but not contents see Rasker, *De NHK vanaf 1795*, 34.

¹¹⁷ On the Réveil in general see Roessingh, *Moderne Theologie*, 43-60; Kluit, *Réveil*; Rasker, *De NHK vanaf 1795*, 71-88.

2.4.2 THE *ALGEMEEN REGLEMENT*¹¹⁸

With the stabilization of the political situation in the Netherlands in 1813-15, the equality of all church associations, and the separation of church and state as declared in 1795, were reaffirmed. That this would have repercussions for the NHK was understood by all. Researchers of this period generally agree that the segregation of church and state during the French Period had left the church in disarray and in need of restructuring. The provincially independent associations of churches and the Walloon church were now to follow their civil counterparts and form one national association of churches. For, it was felt, centralizing the church government would enable the civil authorities, responsible for the finances of the NHK, to supervise the flow of funds. In all likelihood, there were deeper motives: just as political power had shifted from locales to the capital—the Federation of Seven Provinces had now become a Kingdom—so too, church life, determinative as it was for public life, was to be centrally managed.¹¹⁹

When it came to the manner in which the NHK should be reorganized, the king's commissioner general for Internal Affairs, W. F. Roëll, and the secretary for the department for Religion, J. D. Janssen, were more or less of one mind. In their draft church order, no mention was made of doctrine. Through his extensive knowledge of church history, Janssen had become convinced it was very dangerous to point to one system of doctrine as the true one. He regarded possession of the divine truth to be impossible, but something one should pursue through research and logic. It was his intention to regulate the external affairs of the church (matters *circa sacra*); internal spiritual matters (matters *in sacra*) were private concerns. Hence CO-1619 was considered inappropriate for use.¹²⁰

In the summer of 1814, Janssen consulted with three ministers and drafted a set of general regulations for the NHK. On October 12, 1814, Roëll announced to the still existing (provincial) synodical deputies that a committee would be formed to look into restructuring the church. On May 13, 1815, he advised the king to appoint an advisory committee by secret decree. In accordance with this advice, eleven ministers were appointed. The draft written and revised during the summer of 1814 was mailed to them on July 17, 1815, and they were requested to respond in writing.¹²¹

From the responses it became clear that they were not all of one mind. Rev. W. L. Krieger, minister to the royal house, and Rev. A. van Deinse of Oostende and Nieuwpoort, suggested the insertion of the phrase “maintenance of pure doctrine” into the article on the purpose of all those involved with the governing of the church. Rev. C. van der Leeuw of Utrecht went a step further, suggesting that the regulations contain a reference to “attachment to the pure doctrine of the Gospel and the confession founded thereon.” On the other hand, the Revs G. Benthem Reddingius of Assen, W. Broes of Amsterdam, and D. Delprat of the Walloon church in The Hague suggested

¹¹⁸ In addition to works listed in note 115 see Pape, *Janssen*, 121-124; Prins, *Kerkrecht NHK*, Prins, *Het Kerkrecht*, 61-71; Fabius, *Het Reglement van [18]52*, 33-112; De Visser, *Kerk en Staat*, 3:215-228; Van Loon, *Het AR*, 71-153; De Groot, “AR 1816” Oostenbrink-Evers, *KO-1951*, 28-32.

¹¹⁹ On the disarray of the NHK see Rasker, *De NHK vanaf 1795*, 27; Oostenbrink-Evers, *KO-1951*, 28 (esp. note 24). Haitjema speaks of the dislocation of Dutch Reformed church polity (Haitjema, *NH Kerkrecht*, 32ff.).—On the underlying motives for the reorganisation of the church see Van Rooden, *Religieuze Regimes*, 27-29.—The Walloon churches were French-speaking Reformed churches in the Netherlands. On the history of the Walloon churches see www.egliseswallonnes.nl/uk/index.html, the web-site of the Bibliotheque Wallonne.

¹²⁰ Pape, *Janssen*, 196-197. Janssen clearly worked from Supernaturalist presuppositions.

¹²¹ The three ministers with which Janssen consulted were H. H. Donker Curtius, H. W. C. A. Visser, and J. Weldijk. The ministers consulted in the second round were H. H. Donker Curtius, G. Benthem Reddingius, W. Broes, Z. de Jongh, D. Delprat, C. Fransen van Eck, D. Hendriksz, W. L. Krieger, N. Lobrij, A. van Deinse, and C. van der Leeuw. These ministers served in principal cities of the classes and provincial synods of the Low Lands (which, at this point, included Belgium). It is interesting to note that no theological professors participated in this undertaking: it was an ecclesiastical, not academic, happening.

that the regulations make no reference to doctrine whatsoever. They were of the opinion that this was not appropriate for a regulation on church government, nor was it a matter in which the Sovereign should have a say.

A new draft was formulated, including a reference to the doctrine of the church. During the last week of October and first week of November, the advisory committee met for some ten days under the presidency of either Roëll or Janssen in order to prepare the text of the regulations for royal proclamation. In addition to finalizing this text, the advisory committee delegated the drafting of the sub-regulations to various subcommittees. The task of drafting a set of regulations for the examination of candidates, which would include the new form of subscription, was given to Rev. H. H. Donker Curtius of Arnhem and Rev. C. Fransen van Eck of Deventer.

On November 13, the text of the general regulations was presented to the king. Though the king had the regulations reviewed and revised by a committee of three, no changes were made with respect to doctrine. Thus the general regulations were finalised and proclaimed law by royal decree on Sunday, January 7, 1816. These regulations became known as the *Algemeen Reglement (General Regulations)* of 1816 (AR-1816).

The ninth article of this new set of regulations dealt with the purpose of all involved with the governing of the church. It listed as one of the duties of the church board members the “maintenance of their doctrine”. However, it was unclear what “maintenance” would imply in practice. Furthermore, “their doctrine” was undefined.¹²²

The particular regulations, which up to that point were outstanding, were submitted and proclaimed during 1816. In the draft for the *Reglement op het Examen (Regulations for Examinations–REX)* submitted by the sub-committee, the form of subscription contained no reference to confessions or doctrine, only a reference to AR-1816 art. 9. This was felt to be insufficient, and more explicit references to doctrine and confessions were inserted into the form of subscription in its review stages. Thus FS-1816 was born. Other sets of regulations indicate that religious instructors or catechizers had their own form of subscription. It would seem that the exercise of doctrinal discipline was entirely dependent on one’s understanding of FS-1816.

Besides doctrinal vagueness, there was also a more explicit breach with the past. Members of the newly-formed classical boards, provincial boards, and synod were so by royal appointment rather

NHK—AR-1816 art. 9

The care for the concerns, of both Christianity in general as well as the Hervormde Kerk in particular, the maintenance of their doctrine, the increase of religious knowledge, the furtherance of Christian morals, the preservation of order and unity in action, and the promotion of love for King and Fatherland, should always be the main goal of all, who in their various relations, are endowed with ecclesiastical government.

FS-1816

We, the undersigned, having been admitted by the Provincial Church Board of ... (or by the Committee for the Affairs of the Walloon churches) to the public ministry of preaching in the Nederlandsche Hervormde Kerk, herewith declare uprightly: that we will carefully guard through doctrine and life the interests, both of Christendom in general as of the Nederlandsche Hervormde Church-association specifically; that we in good faith accept and heartily believe the doctrine which, conformably God’s Holy Word, is contained in the adopted Forms of Unity of the Nederlandsche Hervormde Kerk; that we will diligently teach and maintain these, and that we will engage in furthering religious knowledge, Christian morals, order and unity, with all ardour; by this our signature we bind ourselves to all the foregoing and, should we be found to have acted against any part of this declaration and promise, on account thereof to submit ourselves to the decisions of the authorised ecclesiastical assemblies.

¹²² For the full text of the *Algemeen Reglement* see www.kerkrecht.nl > auteurs > “Hooijer”. The fact that the text of the general regulations were presented to the king is curious, for the king no longer had a constitutional duty to deal with the matter. See Oostenbrink-Evers, *KO-1951*, 28-29.

than by delegation, as had been the practice under CO-1619. Whereas the Reformed had always defended a fair degree of separation between church and state, this now changed. Noteworthy too is the fact that a synod consisted of two political appointees, a secretary (a minister), a treasurer (an elder), twelve ministers (one from each province and one for the Walloon churches), one elder, and three professors as advisors (one from Leiden, one from Groningen and one from Utrecht).¹²³ Because the ecclesiastical assemblies consisted of appointees, not delegates, and because of its small size, it would later be argued that the boards of the NHK should not be confused with the church, and that the annual synod in The Hague should not be considered the voice of the church.

In general, this form of administration worked well. However, it soon became clear that an annual synod was insufficient to administer the NHK. Thus in 1827, the synod decided to create a permanent committee to manage the affairs of the NHK while the synod was not in session. The seven-member *Algemene Synodicale Commissie* (ASC) was “to keep watch over the execution of ecclesiastical regulations and synodical decisions and serve the government and ecclesiastical boards with advice, clarification, and announcements.” Each year synod would pass a vote of judgement over the ASC’s activities and decisions. It is noteworthy that this ASC was created without the involvement of the provincial boards. The seven members of the ASC became very influential within the structure of the NHK.¹²⁴

2.4.3 INITIAL REACTIONS FROM WITHIN THE CHURCHES¹²⁵

Since the members of the advisory committee were appointed secretly by royal decree and not by delegation from within the churches, one can hardly claim AR-1816 to have been born from the churches. The fact that it was imposed by royal decree on the church implies that its acceptance was not an ecclesiastical act either. Not surprisingly, several protests were heard from within the NHK.

Best known is the protest of Classis Amsterdam dated March 4, 1816. This classis was unsure whether constancy in doctrine would be ensured by AR-1816. On March 18, the general commissioner for Reformed Worship, O. Repelaer van Driel, responded that the civil authority had only intended to change the NHK’s form of government, not the substance of its faith. On March 23, the king’s official response, drafted by J. D. Janssen, received royal approval. The court’s minister, Rev. W. L. Krieger, was also allowed to comment on the draft. He pointed out that the phrase suggesting that “the foundations of the church and the certainty of doctrine is not to be found ‘in paper ramparts’” could give the impression that the government had a low opinion of the confessions. At his insistence, the phrase was deleted. Thus the text for the response became fixed, and on March 28 it was mailed out, not only to Classis Amsterdam, but also to the newly appointed provincial boards, and to CB Amsterdam, and to the governors-general of the provinces.

Protests similar to that of Classis Amsterdam came from PB Noord-Holland, Classis Utrecht, Classis Haarlem, Classis Tiel, Classis Gorinchem, Classis Delft en Delftland, the Walloon church of Dordrecht, and several ministers in Classis Leiden en Nederrijland. The governmental

¹²³ AR-1816 art. 17 (Van Loon, *Het AR*, 225; also www.kerkrecht.nl). Oostenbrink-Evers notes the synod consisted of ten ministers, one from every province and one for the Walloon churches (a total of eleven) (Oostenbrink-Evers, *KO-1951*, 31). However, the Acts make clear that at the synods of 1816-1820 there were 12 ministers: though the provinces of Limburg and Noord-Brabant formed one provincial board Limburg did have independent representation at Synod. In 1821 a thirteenth minister was added to represent the churches in the colonies of the West and East Indies.

¹²⁴ On the formation of the ASC see *Handelingen...NHK... 1827:74-84* (report of advisory committee + regulations), 84-85 (decision). The non-involvement of the provincial boards in creating the ASC was criticised by Prins, *Kerkrecht NHK*, 70.

¹²⁵ In addition to the works mentioned in note 115 see Van Loon, *Het AR*, 154-186. Especially Volger is very complete on the information I here present.

department for Reformed Worship advised the king that the response to the protest of Classis Amsterdam sufficiently answered the other protests. During the opening session of the first synod in 1816, the general commissioner of the king emphasized that only the *form* of government of the church had changed, and assured that the doctrine of the church would remain intact. Synod's task would be to regulate and administer the affairs of the church, not to decide on doctrinal matters.¹²⁶

Whether the responses of the commissioner general and Synod 1816 truly satisfied the petitioners cannot be ascertained. That these initial protests never had a follow-up might suggest satisfaction. However, it is more likely that the petitioners were intimidated and therefore failed to persist in their protests. It would be more appropriate to speak of a temporary cease-fire than of a permanent peace.¹²⁷

The vast majority of ecclesiastical assemblies failed to respond, and seem to have experienced the change from the Church Order of Dort (or rather, the various provincial church orders) to AR-1816 as strictly an administrative restructuring. Its far-reaching implications would only be felt at a later time.

2.4.4 SYNODICAL AFFAIRS¹²⁸

The course of discussions at synodical level on matters related to doctrine is now traced.

In **1817**, the synod was asked whether the practice in Groningen and Friesland of answering affirmatively to a series of questions prior to the celebration of the Lord's Supper should be introduced in all the churches. While the synod considered this matter, the advisory committee was obliged to revise its report no less than twice. This was not without reason: careful study of the various editions of the questions reveals that they became more ambiguous and less orthodox-reformed. For example, whereas the first draft confessed the Bible *as* God's Word and the *total* depravity of mankind, the formulation for the questions finally adopted spoke of God's Word *contained* in the Bible and the *deep* depravity of mankind. Synod 1817 also decided that the Lord's Supper would be open to all Protestants as long as they were "blameless in their walk of life"; there is no reference to doctrine.¹²⁹

In the same year, **1817**, PBs Noord-Holland and Drenthe submitted requests to the synod with respect to instructional aids for religion. The synod responded that it would not publish a list of approved aids nor would it forbid the use of a particular publication. In essence, catechizers were left entirely free to teach *from* whatever they wanted and thus were in fact free to teach whatever they personally wanted.¹³⁰

In **1820**, an elder from the church in Wijk bij Duurstede asked the synod whether elders should subscribe the Three Forms of Unity. Synod responded that there was no general ecclesiastical regulation demanding this. Indeed, a regulation to this end had not yet been drawn up. However, by this decision the synod indicated that it deemed subscription by elders and deacons unnecessary. In 1825, when the *Synodiale Reglement voor Kerkeraden* (*Synodical Regulation for Church Councils* – SRK) was adopted, this indeed proved to be the case.¹³¹

The first doctrinal matter to become entangled in the ecclesiastical web at synodical level concerned two publications by Rev. P. W. Brouwer of Maassluis. It was alleged that these promoted Arminian and Socinian teachings concerning the person and work of Christ. In **1828**,

¹²⁶ The various protests have been published by Van Loon, *Het AR*, 236-262.

¹²⁷ See Moorrees, *Adres GG*, 16; Lingbeek and Kromsig, *Reorganisatie-beweging*, 29.

¹²⁸ In addition to the works referenced in note 115 see Van Oosterzee, *Synode*, 10-21.

¹²⁹ On the Lord's Supper questions: *Handelingen...NHK...*, 1817:64-80 (first set of questions), 80-85 (second set of questions), 87-88 (third set of questions, which were adopted). See Volger, *Leer*, 55-59. The dogmatic hue of the questions betray Supernaturalist influences. On attendees of the Lord's Supper: *Handelingen...NHK...*, 1817:109-110.

¹³⁰ *Handelingen...NHK...*, 1817:44-50. On the closing comment see Volger, *Leer*, 53.

¹³¹ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1820:86; see Volger, *Leer*, 61-62. Van Oosterzee, *Synode*, does not note this decision in his overview.

Historical Part

CB Rotterdam requested the synod to make clear how doctrine was supposed to be maintained in view of these publications. As the submission proved to be technically inadmissible, the synod refused to respond. However, the matter did not end here. The advisory committee had stated in its report that, if the matter had been admissible, it could easily be proven from the regulations that the synod would not have responded to this request. CB Rotterdam understood this to imply that its request could not be resubmitted and protested in the following year. In 1829 the synod stated that such submissions would only be considered when *properly* submitted. Rotterdam then fell silent. Volger concludes: the synod had successfully circumnavigated the reef of doctrinal discipline.¹³²

In **1830**, Rev. H. F. Kohlbrugge was refused admission to the NHK. The sequence of events began in 1827. In that year, having accused a senior minister of heterodoxy, Kohlbrugge was deposed as Lutheran assistant pastor of Amsterdam. After a period of ecclesiastical homelessness, Kohlbrugge attempted to become a member of the NHK in Utrecht. To do so he was requested to present an attestation of good conduct. The Lutheran Church, however, refused to issue such an attestation as he had disturbed the peace of the church and was crossing over to “another confession.” The consistory of Utrecht did not know how to deal with the matter, and its request for assistance slowly wound its way along the ecclesiastical path to the table of the synod. In 1830, Kohlbrugge’s request was dismissed by the synod on purely formal grounds. The Kohlbrugge affair illustrates how, true to its nature, the synod attempted to regulate and administer and not to get involved in doctrinal affairs. Because Kohlbrugge had close ties with the Réveil movement, synod’s decision is considered suspect in orthodox-reformed circles.¹³³

In Groningen the afternoon worship services, during which the catechism was being preached, were being poorly attended. To improve attendance and increase appreciation for the catechism, PB Groningen suggested in **1831** that the synod make catechism preaching obligatory biweekly instead of weekly. The synod, however, did not accede to this request. It considered the practice of catechism preaching as the proclamation of “faith and morals” too important to be made biweekly. In fact, it was suggested that it might be better to switch catechism preaching biweekly from the afternoon service to the morning service. It may be thought that the synod held the Catechism in high esteem. However, the report openly declared the Heidelberg Catechism to be outdated in respect of its *substance*; its usefulness lay in its *practicality*: it discussed not only doctrines but also morals. It would seem the Heidelberg Catechism was considered a mere list of doctrines and morals on which there ought to be preaching.¹³⁴

In that same year, **1831**, the synod deemed that it was time to revise and update the regulations. However, the synod felt no compunction to change anything regarding doctrinal binding. AR-1816 art. 9 remained unchanged and FS-1816, though moved from REX 28 to REX 38, also remained unaltered.¹³⁵

This overview demonstrates that successive synods did not feel the need to concern themselves with doctrinal matters. In fact, synods seemed almost to develop a paranoia for doctrine: wherever the issue arose, a synod remained silent or quickly dismissed the matter. Though one may admire synodical earnestness in engaging in the task of regulating and being the administrative body of the church, this earnestness led to an increasing measure of formalism that would prove frustrating to members of the NHK. Moreover, the failure of synods adequately to regulate the maintenance

¹³² The publications in question were Brouwer, *Bijbelleer* and Brouwer, *Nadere Verklaring. Handelingen...NHK... 1828:53-54, 91-93; Handelingen...NHK... 1829:71-72, 121-124; see Volger, Leer, 63-65. The succession of decisions is not entirely clear to me (as they seem not to have been to CB Rotterdam either).*

¹³³ *Handelingen...NHK... 1830:95-98, 119-120. On the Kohlbrugge affair in general see: Rullmann, Afscheiding; Rasker, De NHK vanaf 1795, 100-112; Otten, Kohlbrugge.*

¹³⁴ *Handelingen...NHK... 1831:153-161.*

¹³⁵ *Handelingen...NHK... 1831:79, 181-182.*

of doctrine betrays its lack of desire to hold fast the truths it had received from the fathers. In truth, the highest authority in the NHK had been taken captive by politically astute freethinkers, who repeatedly outsmarted the pacific, unassuming traditional members of synods.¹³⁶ In its application by successive synods, AR-1816 had begun to disembowel the church of its doctrine.

2.4.5 PUBLICATIONS

2.4.5.1 TEYLER'S GODGELEERD GEZELSCHAP

In 1818, the scholarly society *Teyler's Godgeleerd Gezelschap* (*Teyler's Society of Divinity*) issued a general essay competition. The question to be answered was "What influence have the existence of Forms of Faith or so-called Symbolical Books had on Divine Studies since the time of the Augsburg Confession? To what extent does the tracing of this influence give credence to either the rejection of the continued existence of such books in general or the desire to rearrange the same? And, should the latter be the case, what should such rearrangement look like?" Four essays were submitted but none was deemed worthy of the prize. In 1825, one of these essays was published. As described by Fiolet, it evidenced the spirit of the Enlightenment in arguing that the conscience cannot be bound by human formulae when the divine truths the formulae seek to express exceed all human mental efforts, and are themselves derived from a Bible subject to multiple interpretations.¹³⁷

2.4.5.2 N. SCHOTSMAN

In 1819, Rev. N. Schotsman of Leiden commemorated the bi-centenary of GS Dordrecht 1618-19 with a sermon on Acts 20:30-31a. Schotsman's sermon is generally considered the first in a long line of protests against heterodoxy from within the reorganized NHK. Its effect, however, was minimal. To the extent that it does not contain serious reflection on confessional subscription, it is not useful for this study, but is mentioned in passing because of its probably somewhat overrated historical importance.¹³⁸

2.4.5.3 W. BROES

In 1822, Rev. W. Broes of Amsterdam, one of the members of the advisory committee in 1815, published a treatise in which he discussed the unification of all Protestants in The Netherlands. This could be done, he claimed, in spite of doctrinal differences, since the essence of Christianity is "peace and joy, virtue and piety."¹³⁹

Broes' publication illustrates what little some prominent church leaders thought of the role of doctrine in the church. One may also detect here an underlying motive for minimizing the role of doctrine in the church. Since adherence to a particular doctrine segregates people who claim to confess Christ, Broes and others believed that de-emphasizing doctrine would unify Christians into a singular national church. Van Rooden goes so far as to claim that the former public church with the former protestant dissenters (Remonstrants, Lutherans and Mennonites) together formed a sort of informal national church.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ See Molenaar, *Adres*, 15.

¹³⁷ On this society see Sepp, *Proeve*, 35-53; see Bouman, *Godgeleerdheid*, 130-196. On the essay competition in question see Fiolet, *Onrust*, 20-21. The published essay was by the Lutheran minister J. C. A. Sander.

¹³⁸ Schotsman, *Eerezuil*. On Schotsman see Exalto, Van Gorstel, and Harkema, *Zij die bleven*, 13-39. J. Vree informed me that a reprint of Schotsman's sermon, with an introduction, in 1819 was not sold out until 1838.

¹³⁹ Broes, *Vereeniging*. See Sepp, *Proeve*, 127; Bouman, *Godgeleerdheid*, 347-350.

¹⁴⁰ Van Rooden, *Religieuze Regimes*, 29.

2.4.5.4 I. DA COSTA

A very prominent member of the Réveil circle was the poet I. da Costa, who had converted from Judaism to Christianity. Particularly during the 1840s and 1850s, Da Costa proved to be a divisive factor in the conservative camp on account of his position on confessional subscription. He had already published his grievances against the spirit of the age in 1823 (aged 25!). Da Costa was especially concerned about the increasing influence of the social contract idea on governmental and non-governmental structures in society.¹⁴¹

2.4.5.5 A. CAPADOSE

Another prominent member of the Réveil was Da Costa's cousin, the medical practitioner A. Capadose, who had also converted from Judaism. Reacting to the appointment of an elder in Amsterdam who rejected the Canons of Dort, Capadose published a general work in 1826 dealing with the issue of confessional subscription and deformation in the NHK. This appears to be the first conservative publication after 1816 specifically to reflect on the matter of confessional subscription.

Capadose warned against both biblicism and confessionalism. In the course of his argument he distinguished between the Bible and confessions as follows: the Bible is the infallible standard for faith, and the confessions are “a very necessary bond of unity in doctrine, just as love is the bond of perfection and Scripture the bond of faith.” Capadose defended binding to the substance of the confessions as he regarded these documents primarily as an exposition of doctrines in which unity is necessary. As with Broes' publication, Capadose's fraternization with other Protestants indicates that the trend to trivialize doctrine had such a unity in the background.¹⁴²

2.4.5.6 D. MOLENAAR

In 1827, an anonymous publication addressed to the members of the NHK caused quite a stir. Although its tone was more moderate than the publications of Da Costa and Capadose, the authorities were incensed. Investigation revealed that its author was Rev. D. Molenaar of The Hague.¹⁴³

It was this publication which made the discussion on confessional subscription an ecclesiastical issue. It became ecclesiastical because Molenaar was an office bearer in the church. It became an issue because Molenaar questioned the clarity of the terms in the new form of subscription. What, he asked, do the words “the doctrine, *overeenkomstig* God's Holy Word” mean? Do they mean that the doctrine is to be believed *because (quia)* it is in agreement with God's Word, or that the doctrine is to be believed *in so far as (quatenus)* it is in agreement with God's Word? Molenaar remarked: as it stands, even a Jew could subscribe this! Although Molenaar regretted the unrest his publication caused, he consistently refused to retract his words.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ Da Costa, *Bezwaren*. On the social contract idea see 33-44. According to Da Costa, it was applied not just to government but even to things such as truth, aesthetics, and justice, indeed “for all of humanity in general, as also for every nation and every society in particular.” According to Da Costa the constitution granted by the Sovereign should be simply obeyed, viewing it as a contract would be “a declaration of war against the God to whom all powers belong.”

¹⁴² Capadose, *Wettelijke Strijd*, 1-37. J. Vree has pointed out to me that already in 1825 Capadose published a brochure on the state of the NHK: A. Capadose, *Omstandig Verhaal van de Wederroeping der Benoeming van den Heer Hermanus Brasz, als Ouderling der Nederlandsche Hervormde Gemeente te Amsterdam. Met Bijgevoegde Aanmerkingen Betreffende den Toestand der Vaderlandsche Kerke* (Amsterdam: Den Ouden, 1825).

¹⁴³ On Molenaar see Exalto, Van Gorstel, and Harkema, *Zij die bleven*, 83-99.

¹⁴⁴ Molenaar, *Adres*. J. Vree pointed out to me that it was on account of the publisher, J. H. van Ouden, that this work became widely known. For Molenaar's stance on the functioning of confessions see also the introduction to a publication of the Forms of Unity in 1837: Molenaar, *Formulieren van Eenheid*. On Molenaar's regret but refusal to retract his words see Van Oosterzee, *Synode*, 18 in contrast with Molenaar, *Zelfverdediging*, 5; Posthumus Meyjes, *'s-Gravenhage*, 43.

2.4.5.7 CONCLUSION

The reviewed publications make clear that a storm was brewing in the NHK. Heterodox ministers very carefully began to play the mellow tunes of tolerance. With bugle blasts, the orthodox, both ministers and non-theologians, sounded the alarm. These initial publications were like army scouts: insufficient to be called a battle but a sure sign of imminent war. A struggle was developing between those who sought a moral humanist religion that would make the Dutch people a political and social unit and those who believed they were fighting the principle battles of Dordrecht and the Great Reformation.

2.4.6 SUMMARY

The NHK was reorganized in 1816. The provincial church orders based on CO-1619 were replaced with AR-1816 and the church gained a new structure. With this reorganization, the position of doctrine in the church became unclear. On the one hand, the persons involved in governing the church were mandated to “maintain” the doctrine of Christianity and the NHK (AR-1816 art. 9). On the other hand, FS-1816 was ambiguous and unclear on what this doctrine precisely comprised. As the various ecclesiastical assemblies (especially the synods) became more accustomed to their task, it became evident that a process of hollowing out the church had begun. Janssen *cum suis* had surgically removed the spiritual vocal cords of the church, and church members began to discover that the church no longer spoke. The NHK thus entered an identity crisis. The repeated assertion that the AR only restructured the *government* of the church and had left *doctrine* intact, as well as the use of cleverly devised ambiguous phrases at critical points in the various regulations, ensured that the wool was pulled over the eyes of most of the members of the NHK. Small flames of protest were quickly smothered. In 1818, no one could satisfactorily describe the role of confessions in the church. While heterodox persons dreamt of a tolerant future in which all Protestants could be united, orthodox persons sounded the alarm. For Dutch people who trace their faith convictions back to the Genevan Reformers of the sixteenth century, 1816 was the watershed that gave heterodoxy structural superiority in the NHK. The skirmishes of the 1820s would prove to be heralds of an all-out battle during the 1830s.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ De Groot correctly notes “As to what maintenance of the doctrine of the church exactly is, the regulations do not make this clear. There was in fact doctrinal liberty, although this was not yet the general tendency in the first decades.” (De Groot, “AR 1816”, 112.)

2.5 Increasing Diversity and Division (the 1830s)¹⁴⁶

Slowly but surely, some in the NHK began to realize that the wool was being pulled over their eyes. A new generation woke up to the fact that their church was no longer the church their parents had attended. A crisis was coming to the boil. In the 1830s, events took such a turn that the pot boiled over. During this decade, a sizeable group broke away from the NHK, rationalist scholars openly admitted the new emphasis that leaders in the church were taking, and a new theological movement heralded an era in which organized schools of theology and factionalism would more and more determine the church scene.

This chapter closely examines the reflection on confessional subscription during this decade. A brief general overview of the various theological currents existing in the NHK is first presented (2.5.1). The decade is then analysed chronologically, outlining the course of events and reviewing the more important publications on confessional subscription (2.5.2). There follows a brief systematic analysis of the different positions (2.5.3), and some concluding remarks (2.5.4).

2.5.1 THEOLOGICAL CURRENTS WITHIN THE NHK DURING THE 1830s¹⁴⁷

In his description of academic theological activity in the Netherlands between 1787 and 1858, C. Sepp notes that the Groninger School was the first proper school of divinity. This implies that prior to the Groningers, the theological convictions within the NHK were not organized and, although one can distil various lines and patterns, one should not think of the NHK as consisting of several distinct parties amalgamated in one ecclesiastical body. Prior to the 1830s, the NHK was like a bottle filled with various oils shaken vigorously. It was only after the 1830s when these oils began to separate into distinct layers that one can truly speak of doctrinal “schools of thought” in the NHK. Thus in the description of the various theological currents within the NHK in the following paragraphs, the reader should not think so much of clearly defined schools of thought as of abstract positions to which people in the NHK (especially ministers) held in varying degrees. The following reviews the conservative camp of the NHK, and then two other currents within the NHK.¹⁴⁸

The **conservative camp** sought to maintain the teachings traditionally held in the NHK as outlined in the Reformation confessions, though it is questionable whether all conservatives did in fact hold these teachings. Conservatives generally accepted the supreme authority of the Bible and tended to read it at face value. They varied, however, in how they saw doctrine and piety: some tended more towards rationalism than others. The confessions were maintained because Conservatives were convinced that they expressed the truths of Scripture. Although Conservatives during the 1830s clearly did not form a united front—some left the NHK and others remained—with respect to confessional subscription, the differences did not surface until the 1840s. Accordingly, distinctions within this camp will be described later.

One is hard pressed to find a single designation for the other camp in the NHK, as they were only united by their opposition to the conservatives. One can first note the **Supernaturalists**.

¹⁴⁶ For a general orientation see Rullmann, *Afscheiding*; Reitsma and Lindeboom, *Geschiedenis*, 340-449; Rasker, *De NHK vanaf 1795*, 45-112; Selderhuis, *Kerkgeschiedenis*, various sections in the pages 598-646; Algra, *Wonder*, 95-156; Deddens and Kamphuis, *Afscheiding*; De Jong and Kloosterman, *Reformation 1834*, 21-60 (partly republished in Bouma, *1834-1892*); Van Oene, *Patrimony Profile*, 22-24, 27-83, 84-85.

¹⁴⁷ In addition to the works listed in note 146 see Haitjema, *Richtingen*, 18-49.

¹⁴⁸ See Sepp, *Proeve*, 153.—One could legitimately argue that reviewing *doctrinal* schools of thought in a study of a church political issue is out of place. However, not doing so makes it difficult to link my research into the general web of church historiography. Moreover, failing to follow such distinctions makes for very strange bedfellows, as is evident from Polman’s study, which classifies according to position on confessional subscription and where Remonstrants, Groningers, Da Costa and Barth are all classified under the one heading (Polman, *NGB*, 1:16-30).

Supernaturalism became a set of convictions over against Rationalism, though it continued to use Rationalist methods to defend biblical truth. During the late eighteenth century, its adherents generally tended to hold reformed convictions. However, during the early nineteenth century, it became increasingly evident that rationalist methodology eventually undermined such convictions. During the 1830s, two sub-currents can be discerned within the Supernaturalist camp: the older generation and the newer generation.¹⁴⁹

During the 1830s, the three professors of theology in Groningen, together with a number of ministers, formed the *Groninger Godgeleerd Gezelschap* (*Groninger Society of Divines*). This became generally known as the **Groninger School**, though its adherents preferred to call themselves **Evangelicals**. In 1834, an identity of sorts was established for the group with the publication of *Gedachten* by Prof. P. Hofstede de Groot. In 1837, the school gained a face with the first edition of the quarterly *Waarheid in Liefde* (*Truth in Love*). The Groningers reacted to what they regarded as the intellectualism and apparent half-heartedness of Supernaturalists as well as to what they considered the rigid dogmatism of Conservatives in particular, and of Supernaturalists to an extent. Groningers tended to emphasize the emotional side of life, refused to underpin their theology with a philosophical or epistemological foundation, and considered Christianity to be the highest expression of religiosity. Having biblicist tendencies, Groningers had little use for confessions, and their anti-intellectual standpoint made their view of Christianity a matter of primarily virtue and philanthropy. The dogmatic points on which Groningers held clear-cut positions tended to deviate from the Calvinist tradition. One of their main tenets was the idea that history is God's way of educating mankind. The Groninger school can be considered a parallel to Schleiermacher, although Groningers themselves continually denied they were influenced by Schleiermacher. Groningers preferred to consider themselves a truly Dutch national school and traced their roots to Erasmus, and especially to Wessel Gansfort.¹⁵⁰

What makes the 1830s so special is that there seems to have been an explosion of Conservatism during this period. It could be that this had always existed and was now becoming more vociferous. It could also be that many rediscovered the roots of the Reformed church and chose a more radical Calvinism.¹⁵¹

In summary, there were basically three theological currents within the NHK during the 1830s. There was a broad wing in the NHK tending towards conservatism. Supernaturalists and Groningers represented other directions in the church. While Supernaturalists had a tendency towards intellectualism and had, depending on the person, a moderately orthodox or increasingly unorthodox face, Groningers had a tendency towards a religion of virtuous deeds with an unorthodox face. The first two directions were points of view towards which church leaders inclined to a greater or lesser degree; the third can truly be called a "school" or "movement." These three directions crossed swords on theological issues during the 1830s, in which the matter of doctrinal binding became a focal point.

¹⁴⁹ See Roessingh, *Moderne Theologie*, 12-28. Vree believes the distinction between the two-sub-currents is more than just one of development, he speaks of biblical Supernaturalism (old) and rational Supernaturalism (new) (Vree, "Heringa").

¹⁵⁰ On the Groningers see especially Vree, *Groninger Godgeleerden*; see further: Haitjema, *Richtingen*, 27-36; Huizinga, "Groninger Richting"; Roessingh, *Moderne Theologie*, 28-43; Klooster, *Groninger Godgeleerdheid*. The three professors were P. Hofstede de Groot, L. Pareau, and J. W. van Oordt. The Groningers drew very strongly on the thoughts of Ph. W. van Heusde, professor of literature and philosophy in Utrecht, who in turn was influenced by the German J. G. Herder.

¹⁵¹ It is noteworthy that both H. de Cock (sr.) and A. Kuyper, central figures in the two schisms of the nineteenth century, originally were not true Calvinist scholars. During the 1830s there is also an explosion of publications of the Canons of Dort (Vree has found publications dating to 1833, 1836, and 1837, in 1839 a second print appeared of the 1836 publication).

2.5.2 EVENTS AND PUBLICATIONS¹⁵²

In 1831, the synod revised the AR and various sub-regulations. Where it concerned the role of doctrine in the NHK, the *status quo* was maintained. However, there were many in the NHK who did not agree with the synod. The 1830s would become the first of six stormy decades for the NHK.

2.5.2.1 CONVENTICLES¹⁵³

In 1833, Rev. H. H. Donker Curtius of Arnhem, chairman of the synod, noted in his opening speech the increasing influence of a spirit of separatism. People from the upper and lower classes of society were unhappy with the way in which ministers were preaching, as well as the compulsory singing of hymns they considered doctrinally unsound. These dissatisfied people gathered in private houses for worship in what were called conventicles. Often these meetings were led by elders and renegade church leaders. Much use was made of publications from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, particularly from the *Nadere Reformatie*. The civil authorities disapproved of such conventicles and began to suppress them under a Napoleonic statute that made unapproved gatherings of more than 19 persons illegal.

Only in Axel did a conventicle constitute itself as the “Restored Church of Christ.” This happened in 1823 under the leadership of the non-theologian J. W. Vijgeboom. In this church the Three Forms of Unity and CO-1619 were reinstated. Like many other so-called edifiers, Vijgeboom travelled the country to encourage the believers; he suffered much on account of this at the hands of governing bodies. Under such pressure, it would only be a matter of time before a secession would take place, King William I was warned.

2.5.2.2 THE SECESSION OF 1834¹⁵⁴

In 1829, the moderately rationalist candidate H. de Cock was ordained in the Groninger village of Ulrum by his predecessor, Rev. P. Hofstede de Groot, who had become professor of theology in Groningen. Within three years, De Cock became a fervent Calvinist. He republished the decisions taken by GS Dordrecht 1618-19 (i.e. the Canons of Dort) in 1833 and later, in 1837, a Compendium of Calvin’s *Institutes*. He further publically defended the Dortian faith against his colleagues L. Meyer Brouwer of Uithuizen and G. B. Reddingius of Assen, whom he labelled “wolves in sheep’s clothing.” Many NHK members were attracted to his orthodox preaching. Eventually, parents began to ask De Cock to baptize their infants even though they were not members of his congregation. When De Cock complied, he transgressed the regulations of the NHK. On December 19, 1833, CB Middelstum suspended De Cock from office for not abiding by the regulations, and for disturbing the peace in the NHK. Whereas De Cock saw the situation as arising from a doctrinal issue, the ecclesiastical authorities considered it a matter of order.¹⁵⁵

In 1834, events came to a head. De Cock appealed his suspension to PB Groningen and, upon its being rejected, to the synod. The synod, which met during the summer, decided to give De Cock half a year’s extra time to rethink his position. Within the six months, on October 14, many office bearers and members of the NHK in Ulrum officially seceded from the NHK.

¹⁵² In addition to the works listed in note 146: [Hofstede de Groot], *Bewegingen*; Van Oosterzee, *Synode*, 22-64, Volger, *Leer*, 75-170; Polman, *NGB*, 1:19-23, 31-39; Fiolet, *Onrust*, 41-58, 97-121; Nauta, *Verbindende kracht*, 9-18.

¹⁵³ On conventicles see Van Rijswijk, *Poorten Sions* and the literature list it contains.

¹⁵⁴ In addition to the works listed in note 146: Keizer, *Afscheiding*; Bos and Goslinga, *Archiefstukken*; Wesseling, *Afscheiding*; Smits, *Afscheiding*; Te Velde, *Brummelkamp*.

¹⁵⁵ De Cock (sr.), *Dordsche Synode*; De Cock (sr.), *Kort Begrip der Institutie*. De Cock (sr.), *Verdediging* was written against Brouwer, *Waarschuwing* and Reddingius, *Brieven*. While these works do contain some remarks on confessional subscription, they lack independent importance to warrant separate discussion in this study.

This secession precipitated similar secessions all across the country. Remarkably few ministers were involved: Rev. H. P. Scholte of Doeveren and Genderen; Rev. A. Brummelkamp of Hattem; Rev. S. van Velzen of Drogeham; Rev. G. F. Gezelle Meerburg of Almkerk and Rev. J. van Rhee of Veen. Candidate A. C. van Raalte was refused admission to the ministry in the NHK; he was subsequently admitted to the ministry in the churches who seceded. In spite of the small number of ministers, by the end of 1836 some 130 groups had seceded to form independent churches.¹⁵⁶

However, it was not only the situation in Ulrum and elsewhere that placed confessional subscription squarely on the agenda of Synod 1834. In 1834 the number of Dutch publications on the doctrinal course of the NHK rose sharply. Some of these specifically addressed the matter of confessional subscription.

2.5.2.3 AN ANONYMOUS TRACT [N. BORNEMAN]

One tract addressing the issue was published anonymously in 1834. Most likely, it was written by N. Borneman, who in 1835 became the leading elder in the seceded congregation of Sneek, Friesland. The tract, some hundred pages in length, is specifically concerned with aspects relating to confessional subscription. It basically defended the line of Dort, clearly taking a position against the stance that one subscribes even the dots and the commas of the confessions.

Two matters of special interest are noted.

Firstly, the tract defended confessional subscription along two lines. The first—which may be termed the “natural line”—uses arguments derived from natural law (for example, the right of association and disassociation) and civil duty (for example, changing the confession would require the King’s consent). The second—which may be termed the “spiritual line”—uses arguments derived from the Reformed faith (for example, the normative character of divine revelation as found in Scripture). In this publication the two lines of argument are employed with equal emphasis. As will become clear in what follows, other publications placed different emphases.

Secondly, the tract made several sharp distinctions. Two of these are especially worthy of note. First, a distinction was made between Scripture as source of truth and confessions as expression of faith convictions. This raises the issue of what can be considered the objective and subjective sides to the confessions, the question whether the character of a confession is determined more by the object of confessing (Scripture) or by the subject of confessing (the believer; the church). Secondly, the publication made distinctions between the confessions: the Canons of Dort were considered to be of relevance only for teachers in the church, whereas the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism were relevant to all members of the church. This implies different levels of confessional subscription within the church.¹⁵⁷

2.5.2.4 H. DE COCK

Surprisingly, it would seem that Rev. H. de Cock, a leading figure in the Secession, wrote sparingly on the issue of confessional subscription. One can only find a few remarks made in a tract answering the question “Why should we today believe exactly the same as our forefathers in 1618-19?”¹⁵⁸

As the question indicates, De Cock was convinced the church of the nineteenth century was obliged to hold the same faith as the church in the sixteenth century. This implied maintaining the

¹⁵⁶ Algra has a list of 128 (Algra, *Wonder*, 120), a recent study on church history speaks of “some 130 seceded churches” being represented at GS 1836 (Selderhuis, *Kerkgeschiedenis*, 635). At this moment in time there were 1238 ministerial positions and almost one and a half million members in the NHK (the number of congregations are not listed in the Acts of the NHK synods).

¹⁵⁷ [Borneman], *Formulieren*. This brochure is listed as anonymous in *Knuttel* as entry number 27204. The Dutch digital database PICARTA accredits it to Borneman (<http://picarta.pica.nl>).

¹⁵⁸ De Cock (sr.), *Vriendenlijk Antwoord*.

confessions, a substantive binding. As with [Borneman], hints of two lines of argumentation can be detected, a natural line and a spiritual line.

With respect to amending a confession, De Cock remarked that this can only be done after having discussed the matter with reformed Christians elsewhere. This thought is probably motivated by the participation of many foreigners in the drawing up of the Canons of Dort.

However, one should not conclude too much from these somewhat incidental remarks. A further impression of his position may be gained from events surrounding the adoption of the Church Order of Utrecht in 1837 by the seceded churches (see 2.5.2.15).

2.5.2.5 P. HOFSTEDE DE GROOT

Various non-conservative ministers had been accused of breaking their subscription oath. The Groninger professor P. Hofstede de Groot took it upon himself to defend these ministers against this accusation. His tract, which basically demarcated the Groninger Theology as a separate school of thought, frequently touched on the issue of confessional subscription. He outlined his stance with four thoughts, which may be summarized as follows:

First thought: one is not always compelled to keep an oath.

Second thought: teachers are duty-bound to break their oath concerning the maintenance of doctrine fixed by humans.

Third thought: the NHK has never demanded such an oath.

Fourth thought: one may not bind to confessional documents since they do not express “immutable divine Christendom” but “mutable human perceptions of the same.”¹⁵⁹

Rather striking in this tract is Hofstede’s view of the Reformation. Instead of understanding the Reformation to be a return to what Scripture teaches concerning reality, he understood it to be a reaction against an improper binding authority. He posited that ecclesiastical assemblies do not have the right to prescribe faith. He would seem to be one of those whom [Borneman] accused of wrongly employing the term “protestant.”

Hofstede’s approach placed the confessions in a totally different light. In his view, the Belgic Confession was a temporary testimony, the Heidelberg Catechism an instructional aid like so many others, and the Canons of Dort a necessary evil to assist the Protestants in becoming used to life free from bonds to human decrees. He thus argued that one could not bind to any of these documents.

Hofstede’s argument further indicated that there is an epistemological side to the issue of confessional subscription. He distinguishes between “Christianity” and “our perception of Christianity,” suggesting a Kantian worldview in which knowledge of a *Ding an Sich* is not possible. He explicitly appealed to G. Herder’s idea that history is a process of development. Hofstede pointed out that this understanding affects the existence of documents which claim to state timeless truths.

The foundation to Hofstede’s stance is well expressed by his remark: the question today is not “What ought a Christian to believe?” but “May one Christian lord it over the faith of another?” In essence, this shifts the focus of religion from its contents (*what* a Christian believes) to its act (*how* a Christian believes). This shift logically undermines the legitimacy of a document outlining what the faith is. It is interesting to observe that Hofstede appeals to Belgic Confession article 7 to prove the legitimacy of his stance. Accordingly, Hofstede de Groot argued that a teacher in the church may only teach that of which he is personally convinced.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ [Hofstede de Groot], *Gedachten*.

¹⁶⁰ “Neither may we compare any writings of men, though ever so holy, with those divine Scriptures; nor ought we to compare custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times or persons, or councils, decrees, or statues, with the truth of God, for the truth is above all: for all men are of themselves liars, and more vain than vanity itself.” Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, 388.

2.5.2.6 C. M. VAN DER KEMP

Hofstede de Groot's defence was itself responded to by the Amsterdam lawyer C. M. van der Kemp, one of the members of the Réveil movement. He was not persuaded by Hofstede de Groot's arguments. Neither did he share the position of Molenaar, however. Van der Kemp believed that FS-1816 had to be read in the light of FS-1619. Van der Kemp thus defended subscription to the substance of the confession.¹⁶¹

2.5.2.7 J. HERINGA EZN.

In June of 1834, just prior to the synod and in response to Hofstede de Groot's publication, the Supernaturalist Prof. J. Heringa Ezn. of Utrecht issued seven theses in which he outlined his position on confessional subscription. These theses were the product of several years of study and reflection together with his students.

Like Van der Kemp, Heringa defended binding to the substance of the confession. However, his argument tended to be exclusively along natural lines. Though he refers to Scripture, his references do not actually function in his line of argument.

Heringa's position is puzzling to those studying confessional subscription. With respect to doctrine, Heringa was orthodox. Nevertheless, Heringa claimed that confessions may only be adopted *because* and *in so far as* (*quia* and *quatenus*) they agree with God's Word. The *quatenus* position can be explained by the fact that Heringa's line of reasoning was rationalist.¹⁶²

2.5.2.8 SYNOD 1834

Given tracts such as the foregoing and many others on the more general topic of doctrine in the NHK, it is understandable that Synod 1834 received several rather unusual submissions concerning doctrinal fidelity. They were unusual because they came not from office bearers but from church members. Small groups of people from individual local churches asked the synod outright whether it was actively and intentionally attempting to undermine reformed doctrine. They pleaded with the synod to return to the Three Forms of Unity. Among other things the *quia-quatenus* issue was addressed and a plea was made to reinstate FS-1619.¹⁶³

Synod's advisory committee reported that AR art. 9 should be considered an adequate explanation of FS-1816. The committee also noted that the submissions were technically inadmissible because they had come from non-office bearers, which persons should appeal to the classical boards. This report, which evinces the influence of the Groninger professor L. G. Pareau, was officially adopted by the synod. The acts report:

Synod has judged that these submissions, on account of their unsuitable contents, for all of them together depend on unproven accusations, and, for the majority of them, [on account of] the intention expressed in them, [namely], to cause the creation of harm and disorder in the NHK, not only should not be allowed to be admitted but must of a necessity be dismissed.

The synod thus categorically dismissed the matter. There were several dissident voices at this synod. Four voting members of the synod and two advisors, the ageing professors J. Clarisse of Groningen and H. J. Royaards of Utrecht, had their objections recorded in the acts.¹⁶⁴

However, the dismissal of the protests by Synod 1834 was not the end of the matter. On account of the protests presented at the synod, and especially because of an impending church schism, Clarisse requested the synod to write a pastoral letter to the churches in which ministers would be

¹⁶¹ Van der Kemp, *Beschuldiging*.

¹⁶² Heringa, *Zeven Stellingen*. For an evaluation of what has been called Heringa's enigmatic position on confessional subscription, see 3.4.6.1.5, a footnote there also provides some examples of how Heringa is qualified by scholars.

¹⁶³ The texts of these pleas may be found in Bos and Goslinga, *Archiefstukken*, 1:135ff.

¹⁶⁴ The advisory committee consisted of: L. G. Pareau, C. L. van den Broek, and G. H. M. Delprat. *Handelingen...NHK... 1834:142-146* (report), 151 (decision). See Volger, *Leer*, 154-159. Three of the submissions have been published by Volger, *Leer*, 247-251.

urged to do nothing that would cast a shadow on the purity of their confession and preaching. The synod duly complied. The letter also urged ecclesiastical assemblies and boards to pay attention to the matter and to use church discipline if necessary. Volger remarks that one cannot but be struck by the incongruence of the decisions of this synod: on the one hand it refused to deal with doctrinal issues, on the other hand it called upon the leaders of the church to be pure in confession and preaching.¹⁶⁵

2.5.2.9 ADDRESSES TO SYNOD (LE ROY AND A. RUTGERS)

Several ministers also sounded alarm bells, the most prominent being Rev. A. Rutgers, Rev. J. J. le Roy, and Rev. R. Engels who submitted addresses to the Synod. The submissions of Rutgers and Le Roy touched on the essence of confessional subscription, whereas that of Engels was more generally phrased.

In 1835, Rev. A. Rutgers, together with other ministers from Classis Middelstum, submitted an address on the subscription matter to Synod. Important though it was for its pleadings, this submission did not develop reflection on confessional subscription. It simply urged Synod to chose one way or the other.¹⁶⁶

Rev. J. J. Le Roy became a persistent appellant to successive synods.¹⁶⁷ He is generally considered to be one of those articulating the early position of the Conservatives within the NHK in appeals to Synod during the 1830s. He chose the middle road: while confessions are not essential to the church, as Van der Kemp argued, they are useful to the church, *contra* Hofstede de Groot. Le Roy gives the impression that his view of confessional subscription is mainly argued along the natural line.¹⁶⁸

Le Roy's point of view appealed to many.¹⁶⁹ I believe this was due to the simplicity of his stance as well as his attempts to preserve the *status quo*. His publications contribute little to reflection on the issue of confessional subscription as such.

Other submissions¹⁷⁰ during these years did not develop reflection on the issue of confessional subscription either, hence mere mention of their existence must suffice.

2.5.2.10 G. GROEN VAN PRINSTERER

The lawyer G. Groen van Prinsterer became a main spokesman on the issue of confessional subscription for the conservative camp within the NHK. In 1834, he was a historian and archivist; he later became an influential statesman. He was also member of the Réveil movement in The Hague.

In 1834, he wrote a general publication on how the truth is to be achieved and maintained. In this publication he describes how Scripture is the *norma normans* (standardizing standard) and the confessions are the *norma normata* (standardized standard). Groen also indicated that he was not against new confessions, though he considered the age he lived in unfit to produce them. The line chosen by Groen to defend confessional subscription was primarily the natural one; he appealed

¹⁶⁵ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1834:153-154 (request); 164-165 (letter). See Volger, *Leer*, 156-157. I believe the situation is easily explained. Synod had already taken a principled decision. However, it is quite possible that the members of Synod did not want to upset the aged professors too much and thus, when Clarisse made his request, they allowed it.

¹⁶⁶ As reprinted in Volger, *Leer*, 251-253.

¹⁶⁷ On Le Roy see Exalto, Van Gorstel, and Harkema, *Zij die bleven*, 41-55.

¹⁶⁸ Le Roy, *Gebeuren*, Le Roy, *Middel*, Le Roy, *Adres 1835* and his letters to the synods of 1836 and 1837, republished in Volger, *Leer*, 263-269.

¹⁶⁹ Nauta reports in a footnote that Van der Kemp and Molenaar were appreciative of Le Roy's stance while Capadose was not. Groen, it would seem, was not willing to indicate whether he was appreciative or not (Nauta, *Verbindende kracht*, 15).

¹⁷⁰ The following are found in Volger, *Leer*: S. H. A. Begemann *cum suis* (253-255), J. B. Boer *cum suis* (255-257), J. van der Linden *cum suis* (257-259), J. A. Baron van Zuylen van Nijevelt (262-263), R. Engels (269-271).

especially to the right of association and disassociation.¹⁷¹ One should not conclude too much from this, however, for the tract is written in the context of politics and philosophy.

2.5.2.11 H. H. DONKER CURTIUS

Between the two synods of 1834 and 1835, Rev. H. H. Donker Curtius of Arnhem decided to shed his light on the issue. He was well qualified to do so. He was one of the few drafters of AR-1816 still alive and had, together with Rev. C. Fransen van Eck, drafted the Regulations on Examination, which contained FS-1816. Moreover, Donker Curtius had been a member of every synod since the first in 1816, initially as vice chairman, and since 1825 as chairman. He published three articles, the first two in 1834 (see 2.2.1 and 2.3.1), the third in early 1835. It is the third that warrants attention at this point.

In this article, Donker Curtius discussed the background to FS-1816 and explained the differences with FS-1619. His line of reasoning was especially opposed to that of Van der Kemp: FS-1816 was not to be read *in the light of* FS-1619 but *in contrast to* FS-1619. Thus he was one of the first to admit openly that Synod 1816 had deliberately changed course. As a leading churchman and one of the original drafters of AR-1816 and the REX, his explanation of the course of events and exegesis of FS-1816 weighs more heavily than, say, that of a Molenaar or a Van der Kemp. This is not to say, however, that Donker Curtius' judgment of the situation need be correct in all aspects. For example, one may question his judgment of the binding outlined in FS-1619 as being a very strict *quia*. It is also doubtful whether all members of Synod *consciously* chose to change the *quia* for a *quatenus* binding. Rev. Krieger did his best to safeguard the confessions from slander. In fact, one suspects that men like Krieger had the wool pulled over their eyes by caricatures of Dort sketched by Janssen and Donker Curtius.¹⁷²

It is interesting to note that even the new generation Supernaturalist Donker Curtius intended subscription to serve as a means to keep adherents of certain faiths outside the NHK: Rationalists and Roman Catholics were even named. Binding as such was not considered wrong. On the other hand, Donker Curtius considered binding to the essence (as opposed to the substance) of the confession to be impracticable. As Donker Curtius himself admitted when discussing the ambiguity of FS-1816, at the bottom there was a "form" of binding but nobody really knew to what. Donker Curtius openly admitted that one cannot define "the doctrine" of the NHK. AR-1816 did not specify what this "doctrine" was, and he considered the current synod not legally competent to judge. Donker Curtius himself spoke vaguely of "foundational principles" instead of "doctrines." Although one could argue that at least something remained—that which is characteristic for the church and good—what Donker Curtius precisely intended by "foundational principles" is not clear from his article.

On a more positive note, Donker Curtius correctly pointed out that whilst FS-1619 forbade "secret discussions", discussions on doctrines certainly took place outside ecclesiastical assemblies. The relationship between "prophetic liberty" and "confessional subscription" was indeed an item left open by GS Dordrecht 1618-19.¹⁷³

2.5.2.12 SYNOD 1835 AND BEYOND

The decision of Synod 1834 failed to extinguish the blaze. Incensed by the injustice that had taken place when submissions were dismissed simply because they had come from congregational members rather than office bearers in the church, several ministers, some working together and others alone, resubmitted the submissions in **1835**. They thus hoped to force the synod to consider

¹⁷¹ Groen van Prinsterer, *Proeve*, 26-29, 86-87.

¹⁷² See Molenaar, *Adres*, 15.

¹⁷³ Donker Curtius, "Formulier en Verbindtenis".

the matter. At the same time, those with convictions not fully consistent with orthodox Calvinism took fright and petitioned the synod to maintain the *status quo*.

Synod decided not to accede to the request to explain FS-1816. It adopted the advisory report, which betrayed the Groninger influence of Prof. J. F. van Oordt. Synod noted that (1) an explanation was not necessary; (2) it was impossible to give an explanation that would satisfy all parties; (3) Synod was not qualified to give such an explanation; and (4) giving an explanation would work unfavourably for the NHK.¹⁷⁴

This decision evidences the synodical tendency to skirt the issue of doctrinal binding and to take refuge in the idea that synods exist to regulate the church, not to sit in judgment over doctrinal issues. The only dissident voice at Synod 1835 was that of professor Heringa, who was nearly seventy years old. He bemoaned the fact that six of his former students had taken a stance against him.¹⁷⁵

The petitioners were not satisfied with the response of the synod, and in **1836** the matter was again submitted. However, as in previous years, Synod 1836 decided to dismiss all of them. Undaunted, the petitioners made yet another attempt in **1837**. Of the three submissions, one was dismissed, and receipt of the other two was merely acknowledged. With this fourth dismissal, the flames had been quenched. On the issue of doctrinal binding, the next three years were all quiet on the NHK synodical front. However, these quiet years would merely prove to be the eye of the storm.¹⁷⁶

2.5.2.13 H. J. ROYAARDS

In 1837, Prof. H. J. Royaards published a second volume to his 1834 guide to AR-1816. This second volume was a commentary on various institutions in the NHK as regulated by AR-1816. Almost thirty pages of his work are devoted to the issue of confessions. Royaards had worked with Rev. G. van der Tuuk on the revision of the REX presented to Synod 1831.

Royaards characterized confessions as documents used to avoid strife, state one's identity, and instruct others. He argued that in this process confessions had come to replace Scripture as standards for faith. Royaards then discussed the history of the Three Forms of Unity and the history of subscription.¹⁷⁷ He concluded that these Forms had never been adopted as standards of faith. "They only contained the expression of the faith in which the *Hervormden* concurred. They were, to begin with, Confessions, Acknowledgements, and Instructional Aids; only later did they become Forms of Unity." To his way of thinking, FS-1619 was an honest attempt at warding off heresy, but in the end it had failed. Royaards considered FS-1816 an adequate correction. Royaards considered it proper that subscription was no longer to everything in the confessions but only to what is essential.

Royaards can be seen as a watershed within Supernaturalism. On the one hand, there were many Heringa-like comments (J. Heringa and G. Bonnet are frequently referenced). On the other hand, Royaards carefully admitted that all had not remained the same. He generalized the contents of the confessions, and admitted that with FS-1816 the binding changed from binding to the substance to binding to the essence or the main issues.¹⁷⁸ His solution to the *quia-quotenus* debate was to read the word "*overeenkomstig*" as *quippe* (as being); he considered both a *quia*-binding and a

¹⁷⁴ The advisory committee consisted of J. F. van Oordt, D. Hendriksz, G. van Kooten, and B. Nieuwold.—*Handelingen...NHK...* 1835:120-137 (report), 161-162 (decision). See Volger, *Leer*, 159-167 and Vree, "Heringa", 181-190. The submissions to Synod in 1835 have been published by Volger, *Leer*, 251-262.

¹⁷⁵ On Heringa's role in the discussion see De Groot, "Heringa" and Vree, "Heringa".

¹⁷⁶ 1836: *Handelingen...NHK...* 1836:87. See Volger, *Leer*, 167-169. These submissions have been published by Volger, *Leer*, 262-266. 1837: *Handelingen...NHK...* 1837:109. See Volger, *De Leer*, 169-170. Two of these submissions have been published by Volger, *Leer*, 266-271.

¹⁷⁷ Royaards basically follows the same line which Borsius would take in 1838. See 2.2.1.

¹⁷⁸ See also the submission of G. van der Tuuk to Synod 1835, published in Volger, *Leer*, 259-262.

quatenus-binding improper. However, his suggestion made little impact. It appears in a commentary on church order published a decade later, where it was rejected.¹⁷⁹

2.5.2.15 THE SECEDERS

In 1836, the Seceders convened their first synod. One of the first things the synod did was to express agreement with the Reformed Confessions. A declaration to this end was drawn up and signed by all the members of the synod.

In 1837, the practice was repeated, though this time a subscription formula was drawn up analogous to that used by GS Dordrecht 1618-19. It was signed by all present at the synod. In the acts of subsequent synods this practice does not return until synod 1854.¹⁸⁰

With the formation of an association of churches, the Seceders also had to decide on a church order. In 1837, PS Utrecht submitted to GS Utrecht 1837 a church order drafted by Rev. H. P. Scholte of Utrecht. Close examination of this church order reveals that it is not only a church order, but it also contains confessional articles on the government of the church and church membership. GS Utrecht 1837 elected not to adopt this church order but to draft its own. However, it did adopt a preamble of six articles to this church order. This preamble would more appropriately be called an expansion of the articles of faith on the church and sacraments, for they deal specifically with those who are to be recognized as members of the church. Rev. H. de Cock was strongly opposed to these articles but Rev. A. van Raalte of Mastenbroek convinced him that the doctrinal matters were not of such an order that they warranted another schism. Others, however, were not so convinced, particularly those living in the region of Zwolle.¹⁸¹ As a result, the recently formed association of churches split and the so-called association of *Kruisgezinden*, officially known as the *Gereformeerde Kerk in Nederland*, was formed. The other Seceded churches continued as the *Christelijk Afscheidene Gereformeerde Kerk* (CAGK—Christian Seceded Reformed Church).¹⁸²

Because of discontent and misunderstanding—it seems that many church members in their ignorance thought that the Church Order of Dort was the same as the Canons of Dort—GS Amsterdam 1840 repealed the Church Order of Utrecht (and with it the 6

GS Amsterdam 1836 of the CAGK—art. 4
We undersigned, ministers of the divine Word and Elders of the congregations of Jesus Christ, delegated from the various provinces of our Fatherland, with a view to consulting over the interests of the Church, and over the response, which will be sent to His Majesty, our respected King, with a view to gaining protection for our public Worship services; declare herewith sincerely and in good conscience, that we from the heart consider and believe that all the articles and points of doctrine, contained in this Confession and Catechism of the Reformed Dutch Churches, together with the declaration on some points of aforesaid doctrine made in the National Synod held at Dordrecht in the year 1619 agree in everything with the Word of God. We therefore promise, in the presence of God diligently to teach and maintain the aforementioned doctrine, rejecting all errors contrary to it; that in all our negotiations we shall according to our ability defend and promote the well-being of the Church, and do everything which the King of the Church gives our hand to do; praying the Lord, that He will be pleased to give us in all things from grace His Holy Spirit, to the glory of His Name, which is to be praised in eternity. Amen.

¹⁷⁹ Royaards, *Kerkregt*, 2:113-146.—The church order commentary that rejected the *quippe* reading is Hooijer, *Kerkelijke Wetten*, 57-58.

¹⁸⁰ CAGK, *Handelingen en verslagen*, 1836, art. 4-5; 1837, art. 10-11.

¹⁸¹ Mastenbroek is about 10 km from Zwolle.

¹⁸² On the Church Order of Utrecht see CGKN, *Handelingen en Verslagen*, 105ff. (*Acta 1837*, art. 54ff.); Veenhof, *Kerkgemeenschap en Kerkorde*; Van Raalte, *GKN*, 22-27; Te Velde, *Brummelkamp*, 90-91. Van Raalte refers to it as a Fourth Form of Unity. Veenhof notes that especially Van Velzen was in favour of the binding authority of the church order.—On the history of the *Kruisgezinden* see Engelberts, *GKN*; Van Raalte, *GKN*; Hofman, *Ledeboerianen en Kruisgezinden*; Bos, *Kruisdominees: figuren*; Bos, *Kruisdominees: verhalen*; Bos, *Kruisdraggers*; and Bos and De Kruijter, *Notulen alg. verg. Kruisgezinden*.

articles). The Seceded churches elected to return to the CO-1619. However, the CAGK and *Kruisgezinden* did not reunite, as other factors continued to disturb their relationship.

In theory, subscription among the Seceders became that of Dort. Of special interest is the decision of GS Amsterdam 1836 that not only the ministers subscribe:

The Pastors and Teachers shall, each in their province, by subscribing the old subscription form, bind himself earnestly, as in the presence of God, to the doctrine, worship and discipline of the Christian Reformed Church in The Netherlands. The same shall take place in each congregation by Church Council members, and shall be demanded of all ministers of the divine Word, Elders and Deacons when they enter their ministry, in order to prevent all ambiguity and double-heartedness.¹⁸³

To ensure that the church members could be acquainted with the confessions of the church, Scholte published the Three Forms of Unity in a single publication with a foreword. While the CAGK did not want to judge the hearts of people—and Scholte noted that they felt there were brothers in other churches too—it was necessary for the church to abide by the confessed doctrines. Prayer would continue to be offered that the eyes of others might yet open.¹⁸⁴

2.5.3 ANALYSIS

How did the various factions within the Dutch reformed world stand with respect to confessional subscription during the 1830s? This question is now addressed, followed by summing up a number of points that require systematic reflection.

Conservatives in general argued for the *quia* standpoint. As a result they pleaded in favour of binding to the substance of the confession. Their opponents sometimes caricatured their position as advocating a binding to the letter of the confession, and conservatives were forced to spend quite some space in explaining how their position did not advocate a literal binding.

On this point, Supernaturalists and Groningers were more of a mixed bag. Heringa seemed to defend a binding to the substance of the confessions, though it is known that he had objections to some doctrines in the Reformation confessions. Donker Curtius, knowledgeable representative of the newer generation of Supernaturalists that he was, took the issue a step further. Not only did he loosen the bond between the confessions and Scripture by advocating a *quatenus* standpoint, but he also suggested that binding to the essence of the confessions would be impracticable. He therefore preferred to speak of binding to “foundational principles.” Thus he tried to move subscription to a different sphere: not the sphere of dogmas but the sphere of underlying presuppositions. The Groningers Hofstede de Groot, Pareau, and Van Oordt went a step further still. To them subscription was a matter of subscribing to the act of confessing, having the same attitude as those who wrote the confessions, and not a matter of being bound to the substance confessed. This explains their appreciation for the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism while they were opposed to much of what these confessions propounded.

It is interesting to note how several authors differentiate not only between the symbols and the reformed confessions, but also between the confessions themselves. This raises the question: to what extent does the form of a confession determine its value for subscription? Ought one subscribe the Ecumenical Symbols? Can one subscribe an instructional aid? Should ordinary church members be bound to a detailed exposition of one of the articles in the Belgic Confession if that is how the Canons of Dort are to be understood? How should one see the preamble to the CO-1837?

Another matter deserving attention is the frequently repeated assertion within both camps that confessions are not to be considered “standards of faith” or “source for knowledge of the truth.” Rather, confessions are “standards of doctrine (teaching)” and “an expression (exposition) of

¹⁸³ CAGK, *Handelingen en verslagen*, 1836, art. 70.

¹⁸⁴ Scholte, *Formulieren van Eenigheid*, vi-vii.

faith.” Scripture is considered the highest norm and no confession may stand on a par. For confessions are the product of human activity.

Reflection on confessional subscription in Dutch Reformed circles during the nineteenth century was strongly influenced by the structure of the NHK.¹⁸⁵ Conservatives and their opponents had very different views of the competency of synods and the legitimacy of Synod 1816. Those who argued that the Hagian Synod was incompetent to judge doctrinal matters were in the right: had not the general commissioner said in 1816 that synods existed to regulate and administrate the church and *not* to touch the doctrine of the church? However, one can indeed doubt whether Synod 1816 (and all subsequent synods) were legitimate: they consisted of royal appointees, not persons delegated by the churches.¹⁸⁶ Views also differed on the passage from FS-1619 to FS-1816, conservatives arguing that FS-1816 should be read in the light of FS-1619, and opponents of conservatism arguing that FS-1816 should be read in contrast to FS-1619.

Two lines of argument seem to have been used by participants in the debate. There is the natural line, taking its cue from premises such as the freedom of association and disassociation. There is also the spiritual line, taking its cue from direct prescriptions found in Scripture. At times these two seem to clash, raising the question of priority.

In summary, the more important issues at this stage are the foundation for confessional subscription (*quia* or *quatenus*), the character of the binding, the character of the different confessional writings, the characterization of confessions as “standards of faith” or “standards of doctrine (teaching),” and the legitimacy and competency of the Hagian Synod and ambiguity of FS-1816. Finally, confessional subscription was defended by conservatives along two lines in particular: a natural line and a spiritual line.

2.5.4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The 1830s were heady days for the NHK. People began to wake up to the fact that things were changing in the NHK. Not convinced that this was what the ecclesiastical powers of the day intended, they dutifully requested Synod to resolve the situation. To the surprise of many, Synod proved incapable, and claimed to be incompetent to undertake action. Disappointed, a sizeable portion of Reformed persons left the NHK. Synod bandaged the wound, but beneath the dressing the wound festered. It was only a matter of time before it would break out again.

¹⁸⁵ It is interesting to note that subsequent to 1840 the matter of confessional subscription became a non-issue among the Seceded (though it did remain a point of debate between the Seceded and Calvinists in the NHK). See Van Genderen, "Kerk en confessie", 135.

¹⁸⁶ Vree points out that the Nieuwenga case had made this clear (Vree, "Herziening AR (1846-1852)", 23, 57) and that this was a point of debate between the church polity experts of the day (Vree, "Publiciteit", 192); see 2.6.2.8.

2.6 A Second Wave of General Unrest (the Early 1840s)

It was quiet on the synodical front for three years. The Seceders had gone their own way and dissent within the pews of the NHK had been dealt with. However, this peace was but a lid on simmering disenchantment. The extent of disenchantment among Hervormden who had not joined the Seceders became clear in 1841 when a so-called “monster petition” with thousands of signatures was presented to synod. This petition requested restoration of the confessions of the NHK, and sparked a new round of debate initiating a crystallization of viewpoints within the conservative camp and causing splits within its ranks.

This chapter reviews and analyses the events and publications of the early 1840s as they relate to confessional subscription. The various currents in this period are briefly mentioned (2.6.1). Then a number of publications are reviewed in the context of the course of events (2.6.2). Finally, these publications are analysed with some commentary on the course of reflection on confessional subscription during this period (2.6.3), and some concluding remarks (2.6.4).

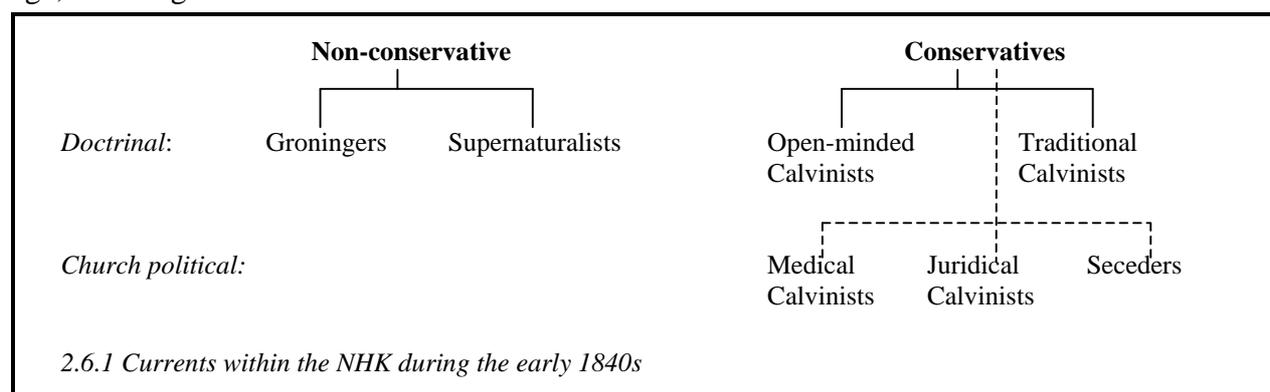
2.6.1 CURRENTS WITHIN THE NHK DURING THE EARLY 1840S

Time had not passed without leaving its mark on the various currents existing within the NHK during the early 1840s, although in essence they did not differ from those of the 1830s (see 2.5.1).

Within the non-conservative camp, the sphere of influence was shifting from the Supernaturalists to the Groningers. The **Groningers** were well organized and had great influence via the universities of Groningen and Leiden. **Supernaturalism**, on the other hand, was fast waning as its response to Rationalism was increasingly considered to be inadequate.¹⁸⁷

The conservative camp can be divided in two ways. One can take a doctrinal approach, comparing them with the Groningers and Supernaturalists. Or one can take a church political approach, in particular on the question of how the church was to be reformed. The latter is more pertinent to this present study, but the former is more logical, so both will be considered.

Doctrinally, one may speak of Traditional Calvinists and Open-minded Calvinists. **Traditional Calvinists** tended to be somewhat hyper-Calvinist, and emphasized doctrine over ethics. They seemed bent on preserving the heritage of former generations. The confessions were maintained especially out of respect for the fathers who had written them. They also displayed a tendency towards pacifism. Traditionalism was especially common among the general populace, particularly in rural regions.¹⁸⁸ The other group can be characterized as **Open-minded Calvinists**, those who sought to take the Reformed confessions seriously on account of their substance rather than their age, and sought a balance between doctrine and ethics.



¹⁸⁷ Nauta correctly remarks that Volger has insufficiently paid attention to the increasing influence of the Groningers and the consequences this had for the course of events in the NHK (Nauta, *Verbindende kracht*, 19-20). Den Hartogh notes that Supernaturalists still had the majority at the synods of this period (Den Hartogh, "Belijdeniskwestie", 114).

Church politically can be distinguished the **Seceders** who, on account of their view of the NHK, chose to go their own separate way. Then there were the so-called **Juridical Calvinists**, those who believed they should stay in the NHK, and insisted on honourable reinstatement and maintenance of the confessions by juridical means. This includes persons such as G. Groen van Prinsterer, A. Capadose, and C. M. van der Kemp. Finally there were the so-called **Medical Calvinists**, those who believed they should stay in the NHK, and insisted on maintenance of Reformed doctrines via relevant confessions; they sought to achieve their goal not by means of judicial processes but by means of debate and appeals to the conscience of NHK members. The poet I. Da Costa can be counted among their number, and other prominent Medical Calvinists were the Amsterdam lawyer H. J. Koenen and Rev. N. Beets of Heemstede.¹⁸⁹

In general, Traditional Calvinists tended to be Medical Calvinists or Seceders, whereas Open-minded Calvinists could be found in all three streams. Because neither the Groningers nor the Supernaturalists felt a need to reform the church, a distinction with respect to church polity serves no purpose.

2.6.2 THE VARIOUS POSITIONS¹⁹⁰

This section reviews the pertinent historical material related to the issue of confessional subscription. A brief overview of the course of events is presented (2.6.2.1), which will serve as a framework for a review of the more relevant publications on the matter of confessional subscription. These publications are reviewed in groups, generally classified according to author or conviction. The first three subsections relate directly to petitions submitted to synods (2.6.2.2-4), the fourth subsection outlines the position of successive synods in detail (2.6.2.5) and the last three subsections review publications written as reaction to the petitions and synodical response (2.6.2.6-8).

2.6.2.1 THE COURSE OF EVENTS¹⁹¹

Early in 1841, Rev. B. Moorrees of Wijk bij Heusden published a small pamphlet bemoaning the state of the NHK and calling upon the members of the NHK to come into action. The result of this call was five submissions to Synod **1841** on the matter of confessional subscription. Four came from church councils. The fifth submission was from Rev. B. Moorrees and five¹⁹² other ministers, co-signed by no less than 8489 members of the NHK.¹⁹³ Synod 1841 considered all submissions inadmissible. However, it did reflect on the matter of confessional subscription in the NHK. Synod adopted a report written by its advisory committee in which it clarified the expression “maintain their doctrine” as found in AR-1816 art. 9.

Instead of calming the ecclesiastical waters, this decision initiated a storm. No less than twenty-one submissions were made to Synod **1842** on the issue of doctrinal binding from all sides. The

¹⁸⁸ Of course, Traditionalists also existed during the 1830s. However, there are no substantial publications from their circle on the issue of confessional subscription dating to this period. In 1860 Groen van Prinsterer distanced himself from this group (Groen van Prinsterer, *Partij*, 36-37).

¹⁸⁹ Koenen and Beets never published on the issue. Nauta has distilled their views from correspondence (Nauta, *Verbindende kracht*). The views of Beets will receive attention in 2.7.—On the distinction within the conservative camp: Den Hartogh speaks of the following three groups: the group with which names such as Moorrees, Lisman, and van de Feen are associated, the group Groen van Prinsterer, and the group Da Costa (Den Hartogh, “Belijdeniskwestie”, 139).

¹⁹⁰ See Volger, *Leer*, 171-220 and Den Hartogh, “Belijdeniskwestie”. Volger has published many of the addresses submitted in this period. See also Nauta, *Verbindende kracht*, 19-33. Nauta concentrates on the conservative camp.

¹⁹¹ In addition to the literature listed in note 190 see Rasker, *De NHK vanaf 1795*, 153-154; Van Oene, *Patrimony Profile*, 89-93.

¹⁹² During the course of Synod 1841 one minister withdrew his signature, hence most speak of Moorrees and four other ministers.

¹⁹³ In 1841 the NHK had 1 614 553 members (*Handelingen...NHK... 1841:7*).

submissions from the conservative wing of the church can be classified into two groups. Moorrees had felt the need to renew his efforts, and several other submissions took the same stance. A second group of submissions centred around a submission from “the Seven Gentlemen of The Hague.” These Seven Gentlemen felt that Moorrees *cum suis* were too negative about the decision taken in 1841.¹⁹⁴ Submissions from the less orthodox wing in the church—the third group of submissions—were directed mainly against the submission from the Seven Gentlemen. The Groninger Rev. A. Rutgers van der Loeff of Noordbroek called upon synod not to become a Roman Catholic board of inquisition. Having taken note of these submissions, Synod 1842 decided to maintain the decision of 1841 for ever and always. Further action was considered unnecessary.

The Seven Gentlemen were disappointed by the synodical reaction and wrote a pamphlet addressed to the members of the NHK. Their opponents were afraid that this pamphlet would initiate a new wave of even more intense protest from the conservative camp. Hence no less than fifty-five submissions from this side were sent in to Synod **1843**. However, the conservative camp had all but fallen silent. A lone fifty-sixth submission by Rev. J. J. le Roy of Oude Tonge attempted to convince Synod that it had misread the submissions of 1842. Besides these submissions, the ASC expressed its concern about the upheaval and the threat that synods might return to taking doctrinal decisions. These fears, however, proved unwarranted. Synod 1843 decided to maintain the *status quo* and undertook no action.

In **1844**, a lone submission on the issue of doctrinal binding reached synod’s table. Again it was from the hand of Le Roy. Besides reiterating his appeal, Le Roy informed Synod that he would begin refusing attestations from churches that clearly did not maintain the doctrine of the church as set out in the Three Forms of Unity. Aside from warning Le Roy that his refusal of attestations would be illegal, Synod 1844 took no action.

With this decision, the second wave of submissions on the issue of doctrinal binding crashed and dissipated on the rocks of synodical bureaucracy. Doctrine had been maintained and successive synods continued with their task of regulating. In **1845**, the ASC comforted synod with the thought that church schism was a mark of the times: what was happening in the NHK was happening the world over.¹⁹⁵

2.6.2.2 B. MOORREES CUM SUIS

It was a pamphlet by Rev. B. Moorrees of Wijk bij Heusden that sparked off the spate of submissions to synods during the early 1840s. Subsequent to the pamphlet, he submitted petitions to Synod 1841 and the King. When his Petition had been dismissed in 1841, Moorrees wrote a second pamphlet.¹⁹⁶

Moorrees’ publications contained many comments on the matter of confessional subscription in the prevailing situation. However, the position advocated was never properly underpinned. The only arguments advocated for maintaining the confessions were (1) they form the constitution of the *Gereformeerde* church, and (2) we have always considered them to outline the truths that God has revealed in Scripture. The issue of whether or not to secede on account of the confessional impasse is much better argued, but falls beyond the scope of this study.

In the end, Moorrees’ publications played an important role in initiating reflection on confessional subscription but did not themselves contribute substantially to the debate.

¹⁹⁴ Interestingly, Moorrees appreciated the Address of the Seven Gentlemen but several co-signers of his address did not. See 2.6.2.7.

¹⁹⁵ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1845:10. Note that this was very soon after the Disruption in Scotland. It should be noted, however, that during the Disruption the issue was not confessional subscription but establishmentarianism and patronage.

¹⁹⁶ Moorrees, *Adres GG*; Moorrees, *Adressen Synode en Koning*; and Moorrees, *Nader Adres*. For the other signatories to the first address, see 2.6.2.5. On Moorrees see

2.6.2.3 THE SEVEN GENTLEMEN OF THE HAGUE

Having observed the course of events in 1841, seven laymen of high social standing, and adherents of the Réveil resident in The Hague, decided to petition synod themselves. They were the lawyers D. van Hogendorp, M. B. H. W. Gevers, G. Groen van Prinsterer, P. J. Elout van Soeterwoude, J. A. Singendonck, C. M. van der Kemp, and the medical practitioner A. Capadose. Together they are referred to as the (Seven) Gentlemen of The Hague. They felt that Moorrees' suggestion to separate conservatives and "liberals" into two associations granted the latter a right that they did not have. In 1843 they issued a second writing, this time addressed to the church at large and motivated by their disappointment with the synodical reaction to their 1842 submission. Nauta indicates that Groen was the primary author of both publications.¹⁹⁷

In these petitions there was more of a balance between the "natural line" and the "spiritual line" of argument than in earlier writings from some of the seven gentlemen. On the one hand, the Gentlemen argue on the basis of the continued right of the binding to the reformed confessions on the grounds that a constitution cannot be sidelined. On the other hand, they proved from Scripture the need to maintain and teach all that God has commanded. In view of the fact that six of the seven authors were lawyers rather than church men, it is understandable that the "natural" line plays a dominant role.

The Gentlemen pointed out that confessions are not rules or standards for faith but (merely) guidelines for preaching and teaching. They likewise remarked that forms do not *create* unity but are a *sign* of unity. The Gentlemen clearly wanted to distinguish Scripture and the confessions and were bent on distancing themselves from the caricature that their opponents painted of them.

Because the Gentlemen were laymen, the Groningers took objection to their stance (see 2.6.2.4). They questioned their right to publish on this theological issue, and challenged the Gentlemen to debate with them in the sphere of academia. The Gentlemen pointed out that laymen, as believers themselves, have the right to test what is taught. They also pointed out that profession of faith is a matter of the church, not of the university.

It should be noted that the Gentlemen were not ultra-strict. Given the prevailing circumstances, they were willing to entertain a form of temporary tolerance with respect to those who were not fully Calvinist. Moreover, they coined the phrase "broad-minded and unambiguous" ("*onbekrompen en ondubbelzinnig*")¹⁹⁸ to indicate that whilst they did not advocate subscription to the letter of the confession, the contents of the confessions were important nonetheless. They wrote:

[At this moment] every church member has the right to desire a lucid and certain declaration whereby, through the adoption of the confessions in a broad-minded and yet unambiguous way (*onbekrompen en ondubbelzinnig*), those matters be recognized as guideline for preaching and teaching which the NHK has always considered to be the essence and main substance of reformed and Christian doctrine.

In practice, however, the phrase has proven somewhat ambiguous. Often considered to be a mark of reformed orthodoxy, it is used to describe all manner of confessional subscription, even today.¹⁹⁹

The importance of these two publications for reflection on confessional subscription can hardly be underestimated. It is from the first petition that the concept of a "broad-minded and unambiguous" binding stems. It is also on account of these petitions that the Calvinists divided into two camps on the issue of when secession is legitimate. Moreover, the glaring absence of the

¹⁹⁷ Nauta, *Verbindende kracht*, 21.

¹⁹⁸ In Dutch both words are negatives. I have, however, not found an adequate translation of the term "*onbekrompen*" which also begins with a negating prefix.

¹⁹⁹ Van Hogendorp, *Adres aan de Synode* (the quote is from page 19) and Van Hogendorp, *Hervormde Gemeente*. On the phrase "broad-minded and unambiguous" see 3.4.4.3.2.3.

signatures of I. da Costa and H. J. Koenen at the foot of these two petitions—both had been approached to participate—points to the fact that even the Calvinists within the NHK were divided over the issue: these petitions might be termed the first manifesto of what is later termed the Juridical (as distinct from the Medical) Calvinist camp.

2.6.2.4 TWO GRONINGERS: A. RUTGERS VAN DER LOEFF AND P. HOFSTEDE DE GROOT

One can well imagine that the Groningers did not think too kindly of the accusations that the Gentlemen levelled at them. Two responses are worth noting in the context of this study. The first is a petition to Synod 1842 by Rev. A. Rutgers van der Loeff of Noordbroek, co-editor of the Groninger journal *Waarheid in Liefde*. His petition was written in the period between the two publications of the Gentlemen. The second is the publication of a speech given by Prof. P. Hofstede de Groot of Groningen after Synod 1842 in defence of the Groninger Theology.

These responses from Groningers make clear that they stood diametrically opposed to the Gentlemen on the issue of confessional subscription. Nevertheless, Hofstede claimed that the Groningers were faithful to the confessions as the NHK understood such faithfulness.

The Groningers raised the issue of doctrinal development and the sphere in which this ought to be tried. They considered it possible for a truth to be contradicted by the progress of theological research. Hence they felt that doctrine cannot be tried in the sphere of the church, since it belongs in the sphere of the university. Unchanged confessions hinder scientific progress, Rutgers argued. However, Hofstede noted that the propriety of Groningers in the NHK should be judged by the proper ecclesiastical courts, not by individuals. This seems contradictory. If it is indeed contradictory, could the source of this contradiction lie in the fact that Rutgers wrote prior to Synod 1842 and Hofstede spoke with the knowledge that Synod 1842 had decided to maintain the decision of 1841 “for once and always?” Or is there no contradiction and should one see here two different issues: the first the substantive question of doctrine and the second the formal or regulative question of tolerance for a particular persuasion within a church? Whatever the case may be, it is clear that the Groninger stance on confessional subscription was strongly shaped by their view of what the church is.

The Groningers pleaded very strongly for freedom of research. Thus they also opposed the idea that Forms were standards for preaching. They argued that a preacher should be granted the room to proclaim his own faith convictions. Thus Hofstede explained the term “conformably” as being a binding to principles *quia* and to individual doctrines *quatenus*. Groningers clearly did not want to be bound substantively to confessions.

Just as the conservatives were critical of their opponents, so the latter were critical of conservatives. Hofstede stands on firm ground when he asks the conservatives why the NHK should retrace its roots to 1618-19 and not beyond to 1568 or even earlier. Was Hofstede wrong when he alleged that one must judge a church by its *present* papers?

Hofstede also challenged the comparison made between the confessions and a constitution. In his view, the order of the church (i.e. AR-1816) should be seen as the constitution of the church, not its confessions. From a church political point of view, Hofstede’s criticism makes sense. However, the question may be raised whether doctrine is indeed as mutable as Hofstede considered it to be.

In closing, it is noted that Hofstede reasserted that the Heidelberg Catechism, being an instructional aid, could not serve as a confessional document. He also noted that the Belgic Confession was no more than an apologetic document.²⁰⁰

²⁰⁰ Rutgers van der Loeff, *Adres* and [Hofstede de Groot], *Toespraak*.

2.6.2.5 THE SYNODS OF THE NHK²⁰¹

Having reviewed the more important petitions submitted to the synods of 1841 and 1842, a closer look is now taken at the decisions by the synods of 1841 through 1844 on the matter of confessional subscription.

In **1841** there were five submissions: four from church councils, and the petition with thousands of signatories headed by that of Rev. B. Moorrees.²⁰² All these petitions came from the conservative camp. The Supernaturalist Rev. I. J. Dermout, minister of the royal court and secretary of every synod since 1816, reported on behalf of the advisory committee.

The advisors considered the submissions of the four church councils inadmissible since they had not been submitted in keeping with the regulations. The value of Moorrees' submission was also questioned. Since many people had simply signed with an "x," the committee deliberated whether synod should not consider this a submission made by people not competent to judge the issue. The advisory report defended FS-1816. It noted that it had functioned well for the past twenty-five years. Moreover, "maintaining doctrine" was a matter of generally adhering to the doctrine found in the confessional writings of the church "*as they determine in their nature and spirit the essence and main substance of the confession of the Hervormde Kerk.*" The report considered FS-1816 superior to FS-1619 in that it spoke not only of one's doctrine but also of one's walk of life, and compelled subscribers to seek the unity of all Christians. The Forms of Unity were being properly maintained, the report argued, for they were maintained in submission to God's Word. At every celebration of the Lord's Supper, the congregation reasserted its adherence to the "essence and kernel" of the doctrine. The advisory committee admitted that FS-1816 was ambiguous on some points but felt this also applied to FS-1619.²⁰³ Let us not forget, the report stated, that neither the letter nor church statements work faith but the Spirit, and that doctrine is preserved, not by signatures, but its living in our hearts.²⁰⁴

Synod unanimously adopted this report as expressing its position in the matter. The acts of synod state:

Synod has judged that the old and fixed foundations of the *Gereformeerde Kerk* have in no way been uprooted by the present structural organization of the church and declares, given this fact, sanctioned by the Rules and Regulations that have proceeded from it, the requests of the petitioners to be inadmissible.²⁰⁵

With this decision, the italicized words quoted above from the advisory report ("*as they determine etc*") began to function as the official explanation of the word "doctrine" in AR art. 9. However, instead of clarifying the situation, the issue became more complex. Prior to 1841, no one really knew what "doctrine" meant because it was *undefined*. After 1841, no one still knew what "doctrine" meant because it was *ill* defined. Conservatives could no longer ask for "a definition" – they had one. Conservatives would now have to ask for an explanation of the definition, or request that it be changed – formally speaking a more radical step since it would mean disagreeing with the present state of affairs.

At Synod **1842** there were petitions from both camps. An advisory committee collated and summarized the various reports but did not discuss the issue itself. The committee felt the synod

²⁰¹ In addition to Volger and church historical works see Van Oosterzee, *Synode*, 64-105.

²⁰² The other ministers that signed this address were C. D. L. Bähler, W. de Rapper, P. D. Koopmans, G. Landweer, and J. W. Becking (Volger, *Leer*, 178).

²⁰³ The report fails to state in which way 1619 is ambiguous.

²⁰⁴ The advisory committee consisted of Rev. I. J. Dermout, Rev. C. L. van den Broek, and Rev. A. Francken. Both Dermout and Francken were Supernaturalists. The report was considered so important it was published separately (Dermout, I. J., Van den Broek, C. L., and Francken, A., *Rapport 1841*).

²⁰⁵ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1841:127-138 (report), 138 (decision).

need do nothing since the decision of 1841 had been clear enough. In accordance with this advice, the synod decided:

... having considered that no Christian church association can flourish or exist if there is no agreement with respect to the main points of religious convictions and doctrine between congregations and their Teachers and other Instructors in religion, the Synod, having clearly and fully expressed its opinion regarding the value of the Symbolical writings and their binding authority last year, superfluously declares once again, that it will persist with that decision once and for always: - that it therefore rejects and continues to reject every opinion, which would undermine or attack the authority of God's infallible Word, contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Covenants, and the essential doctrine of the Hervormde Kerk; - that it nevertheless is restricted from passing judgement on someone's soundness in doctrine, unless the matter has been brought to it along the path stipulated by the ecclesiastical regulations.

With this decision it became clear that the NHK had adopted a position on the issue of doctrinal binding. In 1841 "doctrine" had been defined, and in 1842 its synod stated that it would persist with this definition "once and for always." Ambiguity had been resolved. It should be noted that Synod did not leave subscription entirely out in the open. Candidates for the ministry were not to be granted access to Hervormde pulpits unless their convictions agreed sufficiently with the Forms. Synod, however, did not define the term "sufficiently" – this was for the Provincial Boards to decide.²⁰⁶

In 1843 there were fifty-six submissions, fifty-five of which came from the non-conservative camp. The synod, however, decided that there was no need to undertake action. It would seem that with this year the members of the church had realized that synods would not be moved.

Rev. Le Roy petitioned synod again in 1844, but his petition had little chance of success. For the ASC had warned the synod not to become entangled in doctrinal matters, since this would compel it to take sides. The ASC pointed out:

We shall remain united in unanimity of feelings and persuasion concerning the teachings which, abstracted from every form, in which each century in its own way holds forth the pure understanding of faith, have always determined the essence and the main substance of the confession of the Hervormde Kerk.²⁰⁷

One could speculate about a change of tack with respect to 1834 and 1835. In those years the synods had declared themselves incompetent to judge the *quia-quotenus* issue. In 1841 and 1842, however, the synods explained the phrase "maintain their doctrine" and even stated that doctrinal judgment could be passed if a matter was tabled in accordance with the regulations. Should not the decisions of 1841 and 1842 be classified as doctrinal in character, and be found to be in contravention of the assurance expressed in 1816 that Synod existed only for the administration of the church? As will become clear, this question has arisen before.

2.6.2.6 I. DA COSTA

When the Seven Gentlemen published their *Petitions*, the name of I. da Costa was glaringly absent. Much correspondence had already passed between Da Costa and Groen on the issue. In 1843, Da Costa felt compelled to publish a tract in which he accounted for the absence of his name, and described his own position on confessional subscription.

Da Costa's view of the role of doctrine is well expressed in his words:

²⁰⁶ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1842:97-106 (report), 108-109 (decision), 132-135 (text of the declaration). The advisory committee consisted of H. Bouwman, C. de Visser, and G. Ruitenschild. Many of the submissions have been published by Volger, *Leer*, 269-283. Hofstede admitted that the decisions could be understood in more than one way (Hofstede de Groot], *Vreeze*, 4).

²⁰⁷ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1843:139-152 (report), 189 (decision); *Handelingen...NHK...* 1844:203-207 (report), 258 (decision).

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firmness in that to which we have come, a striving towards that which yet lies ahead of us, and with respect to that which is fixed, to strive for understanding and insight that is deeper, more intense, more lively, and more in keeping with the progress of time.

Da Costa developed a unique stance on the issue of confession and subscription. Theoretically, he was in favour of binding fully to a confessional statement. However, because he felt such a confessional statement ought to be relevant and up-to-date, he was not in favour of subscribing the Three Forms of Unity. One of Da Costa's catch-phrases was "the power of a confession lies in its freshness." In this way he wished to underscore that a confession must be relevant, and he considered this possible only when a confession was drawn up by each generation itself.

Da Costa also advocated his own approach to the problem of reforming the NHK. Whereas the Seven Gentlemen chose the juridical path of honouring ancient rights, and Seceders parted ways with the NHK, Da Costa chose what came to be termed the "medical" path: the truth must be declared, and those who have gone astray must be challenged to leave their erring ways. Those who cannot be convinced will eventually leave of their own accord, and those who are persuaded will thus be spared unnecessary expulsion. Da Costa believed that such action would eventually lead to a satisfactory outcome.²⁰⁸

2.6.2.7 G. DE HOEST *CUM SUIS*

Da Costa was not the only conservative to react to the petition of the seven Gentlemen. Several co-signers of the Moorrees' petition, the laymen G. de Hoest, P. J. van Zuylen van Nyevelt, the publisher J. H. den Ouden, and the medical practitioner Z. H. van der Feen, took it upon themselves to defend the 1841 petition. In a postscript they also reacted to Da Costa's publication. This publication warrants special attention since it is the foremost document from the nineteenth century that articulates a position approximating (if not actually advocating) subscription to the letter of the confession.²⁰⁹

This tract strongly emphasized a desire to return to the "ancient *Gereformeerde* church" in contrast to the Seven Gentlemen, who, its authors believed, wanted a new church. The authors were strongly attached to the traditions of the Reformation; at one point they even placed the Reformers on a par with Moses and the apostles. The authors give the impression that their appreciation for the reformed confessions is primarily based on their belief that their contents are of divine origin. De Hoest *cum suis* emphasize the objective side to the confessions.²¹⁰

Even more so than the Gentlemen, De Hoest *cum suis* considered the confessions to be the constitution of the church. They took this to the logical extreme, arguing that there are 37 doctrines which should have been listed by the Gentlemen.²¹¹ The authors also argued that confessions cannot be augmented. Their argument drew on an expression from the classic Form for Baptism, that of

²⁰⁸ Da Costa, *Rekenschap*. Nauta pays quite some attention to the position of Da Costa, deriving much of his material also from Da Costa's correspondence (Nauta, *Verbindende kracht*, 23-33).

²⁰⁹ Den Hoest, *Noodzaakelijke Aanwijzing*; see Vree, "Den Ouden".

²¹⁰ On Moses, the apostles, and the authors of the confessions see Den Hoest, *Noodzaakelijke Aanwijzing*, 111.—Why De Hoest *cum suis* believed the Seven Gentlemen wish to introduce a new church is unclear to me. The Gentlemen, too, insisted on the unchanged right of confessional subscription and wished to see reinstated the Three Forms of Unity. De Hoest *cum suis* considered the Gentlemen and Da Costa to argue more or less for the same on this score while it was precisely on this point that Da Costa refused to participate in the address of the Gentlemen. The caricature thus painted by De Hoest *cum suis* makes me doubt even more how well thought out their stance actually was.

²¹¹ On this score De Hoest *cum suis* could be seriously critiqued: why refer only to the Belgic Confession and why should Belgic Confession article 9 (proof-texts for the doctrine of the Trinity) be considered a separate doctrine to that of article 8 (doctrine of the Trinity)?

“the complete doctrine of salvation.” Their reading of this line was that “complete” means perfected.²¹² They further argued that a synod does not have the authority to change a confession.

Although De Hoest *cum suis* at one point stated that they did not wish to bind to sounds and letters, one cannot escape the impression that they were in fact advocating literal subscription. They wrote:

Every truth found in our confession, even every form of presentation, is expressed so exemplary and accurately and carefully, that it in everything, in every article and every piece, bears the peculiar characteristic properties of true doctrine, and thus the doctrine of our *Gereformeerde* church, so that it is always evident, whether something is divine truth or not, whether it is reformed what someone is teaching.²¹³

The confessions might not actually be inspired, but as De Hoest c.s described them they seem to come very close.

Finally, De Hoest *cum suis* considered the confessions primarily a list of doctrines necessary for salvation, the standard that indicates whether one is Reformed or not. Confessions are necessary, they argued, because anyone can twist the words of Scripture to suit their own end.

Noodzaakelijke Aanwijzing is a prime example of how Traditional Calvinists thought and argued. In many respects their argument was naïve. Though it sounds very pious, it is remarkable to see how De Hoest *cum suis* (in contrast, for example, with Van der Kemp) fail to draw on Scripture to underpin their arguments. In the final analysis, their argumentation is built on premises such as “divine means unchangeable” combined with a strict reading of tradition. The publication is interesting as evidence for the naïve position of laymen on confessional subscription, but its position in the sphere of reflection on confessional subscription as a whole is questionable. Since even Rev. B. Moorrees could not subscribe to their ideas, the ideas of these laymen should not be granted much weight.²¹⁴

2.6.2.8 C. HOOIJER

This review of the period concludes by noting a commentary on church order published in 1846 by Rev. C. Hooijer of Zaltbommel. By this stage, the second battle had come to an end and initiatives were being undertaken to re-evaluate the regulations of the NHK. Hooijer took a descriptive approach in his commentary and was not afraid to voice criticism.

In the course of his commentary, Hooijer attempted to explain what had been an enigma to the NHK ever since AR 1816 had taken effect: the precise relationship between a synod and doctrine. He indicated that a synod has a *jus circa doctrinam* but no *jus in doctrina*: the task of a synod is limited to ensuring that there are institutions that will maintain doctrine.

Hooijer thus clearly described where, in view of the regulations, the limits to the competency of a synod lies. He concluded that, by the letter of the law, synods had acted inappropriately in both 1834-35 and 1841-42. In 1834-35 the synods had not gone far enough: they had refused to explain a regulation even though a synod has the right and duty to do so. In 1841-42 the synods had gone a step too far: they not only explained but also regulated a matter of doctrinal binding (binding of candidates), something a synod may not regulate. Hooijer thus undermined the propriety of the two sets of decisions that served as milestones in reflection on confessional subscription in the NHK during the first half of the nineteenth century.

²¹² However, the question does not state what De Hoest *cum suis* believe it says. The “doctrine” referred to is not that of the creeds but that of Scripture. In other words: the parents are asked whether they believe whether the doctrine found in Scripture is the complete doctrine to salvation.

²¹³ Den Hoest, *Noodzaakelijke Aanwijzing*, 23.

²¹⁴ Certainly not as much as what Polman gives it (Polman, *NGB*, I:36-39).

While reflection on the form or propriety of confessional subscription is absent, the value of this commentary lies in its frank admission of the fact that the approach of the NHK was shrouded in ambiguity.²¹⁵

2.6.3 ANALYSIS

Analysing the publications outlined above, it can be observed that there were five prominent groups, each with its own stance on confessional subscription. These were the Supernaturalists, the Groningers, the Traditional Calvinists, the Juridical Calvinists, and the Medical Calvinists. This section analyses the positions of these five groups on a number of issues related to confessional subscription as debated during the 1840s.²¹⁶

One can observe how during the 1840s the Juridical Calvinists achieved a relative balance between what has been termed the natural and spiritual lines of argument. This is due to the more mature view of their authors as well as the ecclesiastical context in which they wrote. With the Traditional Calvinists, especially as articulated by De Hoest *cum suis*, one notes how the natural line of argument plays a more dominant role, especially the argument that the truth is unique and unchangeable, and that what has once been confessed as truth remains truth forever. By contrast, the Medical Calvinist position articulated by Da Costa takes a more spiritual line.

During the 1830s there were those who defended subscribing the substance of the confessions (Calvinists), those who defended subscribing the essence of the confessions (Supernaturalists), and those who defended subscribing the intent or attitude or fervour of the confessions (Groningers). In reality, the concept of subscribing the letter of the confession existed only as a straw man. During the early 1840s, these positions were also present in the debate. In essence, the binding defended by both Groningers and Supernaturalists was to the form of the confessional statements; the contents or substance were not considered strictly relevant. Hofstede de Groot spoke of binding to “principles,” and the synods spoke of binding to a further unspecified “essence and main substance.” The Juridical Calvinists in principle defended subscription to the substance, but legitimate questions arise about this “substance” due to their use of the phrase “broad-minded and unambiguous,” their defence of temporary tolerance, and their somewhat attenuated list of “necessary doctrines”. Da Costa and De Hoest *cum suis* both defended what in theory comes very close to literal binding. Like the other groups, the Traditional Calvinists defended their position in relation to the existing confessions. Da Costa, however, had a newly-written confession in mind, which meant in practice that he was against literal subscription to the Three Forms of Unity.

The various groups also characterized the confessions differently. The Groningers persisted with their rather trivializing approach: the Belgic Confession was nothing more than an apology and the Heidelberg Catechism a mere instructional aid. They also argued that each period should produce its own confessions – in the spirit of the ancient confessions but with the fruits of up-to-date research. Groningers denied the Forms any objective role in faith life other than as a template for profession. Traditional Calvinists held the opposite position: the Forms were the constitution of the church and contain a complete set of all necessary divine truths to be maintained in perpetuity. Traditional Calvinists thus basically objectified the confessions. Between these two extremes are found the positions taken by the Juridical and Medical Calvinists. The former emphasized the objective role played by confessions: they are guidelines set by the church for preaching and teaching and should remain more or less the same. Da Costa, however, emphasized the subjective role of confessions: they are an expression of the faith that lives in a person and should be fresh.

²¹⁵ Hooijer, *Kerkelijke Wetten*, 26-27, 47-49, 56-58. For further discussion see Vree, "Publiciteit".

²¹⁶ Nauta lists three because he does not take into consideration the stances of the Supernaturalists and Groningers (Nauta, *Verbindende kracht*, 19-33). Besides these five one could also note the Seceders. However, to my knowledge, the Seceders did not publish on the matter during the early 1840s.

This indicates a point of tension on the issue of confessional subscription: can the objective and subjective roles that confessions play in the church be combined without hampering each other?

Another issue that arose is the question of confessions and academic progress. Groningers argued that maintaining fixed confessions inhibits progress. Hofstede de Groot also found the argument of conservatives arbitrary: why, he asked, go back to 1618-19 and not to 1568 or earlier? De Hoest *cum suis* however considered progress possible, pointing out by way of example that it is possible to add more proof texts for a particular doctrine. The Seven Gentlemen argued that confessions do not obstruct progress, but rather prevent backsliding. Here again a crux is encountered: what is the relationship between academic theological research and the fixed character of doctrines contained in the confessions?

Finally, it is noted that for the 1830s the prevailing circumstances and the view of the NHK shaped the views of confessional subscription. During the 1840s, the problems created by the structure of the NHK were unequivocally stated. Hooijer was prepared to write in an authoritative commentary on church order that synodical decisions in 1834-35, and to an extent in 1841-42, literally contravened the regulations of the NHK. Synod, he claimed, has no responsibility for doctrine than to ensure that theological universities and other institutions exist to maintain doctrine. It appears that the conservatives were not quite able to keep reality and their own ideals apart. Traditional Calvinists argued for the immediate reinstatement of the old confessions and church order, a practical impossibility. Juridical Calvinists were a little more modest in their aims, but they too insisted upon the honouring of ancient rights to restore the NHK by juridical means. On this score, Da Costa's position is of great interest. Instead of seeking a solution in the past, he looked to the future. He preferred to restore the NHK by medical means, believing in the power of the Word, and considering regulations to be of secondary importance.

In summary, during the early 1840s, reflection on confessional subscription took on a much more clear-cut and substantial form.²¹⁷ There was more of a balance in conservative writings between the natural and spiritual lines of argument. More dominant in reflection on confessional subscription were the matters of the extent of binding and the reformation of the NHK. A full spectrum of types of confessional subscription was present in the debate. Tension was beginning to show on the matter of the objective and subjective sides of a confession, as well as the question of how theological progress stands in relation to confessions. It is clear that the actual situation in large part determined the parameters and direction of the debate.

2.6.4 CONCLUSION

During the early 1840s, the wound bound up by the synods of 1834 and 1835 ruptured. Synods were forced to take more drastic measures and thus adopted a position with respect to confessional subscription. However, this response did not resolve the issue but created more problems: what had been *undefined* was now *ill* defined. The 1840s placed the issue even more squarely on the agenda of the NHK than the 1830s had done. The situation had become ripe for thoughtful minds, and sharpened quills to reflect in detail on confessional subscription.

²¹⁷ Nauta describes this period as “diverse standpoints out in the open” (Nauta, *Verbindende kracht*, 19).

2.7 Re-orientation and Crystallisation (1845-1860)

The history of the NHK during the middle two decades of the nineteenth century may be characterized as momentous and accelerating. With respect to theological currents, there was the rise of no less than three new schools: the Modernists, the Ethicals, and the Apologists. Moreover, the various currents became increasingly organized, with their own associations and journals. The NHK as a whole also underwent a partial metamorphosis when its regulations were thoroughly overhauled. Finally, within the conservative camp, views on confessional subscription crystallized, resulting in vehement debates and the slow disintegration of what had thus far been more or less a united front.

The limits for this chapter have been chosen with a view to what had just passed and what was about to occur. The previous chapter ended with the decisions of 1841 and 1842, and their immediate consequences. In 1845, that storm had died down, so that it may mark the beginning of a new period. The other limit, 1860, is chosen with a view to the formation of various organizations, especially Ethicalism. Moreover, the 1860s can be seen as a distinct period, since it was especially the decade of one-to-one polemics.

This chapter briefly outlines the various theological schools of thought in the NHK during this period (2.7.1), then reviews the course of events, presenting summaries of pertinent publications in the relevant years (2.7.2). Finally, there is a comparison and analysis of the various positions defended throughout these years (2.7.3), with some concluding remarks (2.7.4).

2.7.1 THEOLOGICAL SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

The theological church scene changed drastically during the mid-nineteenth century. This section aims to outline the various theological schools of thought and factions as they existed during this period.

2.7.1.1 GRONINGERS

During the 1840s and 1850s, the **Groningers** reached their peak of influence.²¹⁸ Groninger professors had gained influence at the universities of Groningen and Leiden, and many of their students had become pastors in the NHK. Via their journal *Waarheid in Liefde*, they spread their ideas to a broad public across the nation. Ministers with Groninger leanings predominantly established and thus initially tended to dominate the ministerial associations in various regions.²¹⁹ In general, the Groningers maintained their doctrinal convictions and especially their anti-intellectual stance. The younger generation took these convictions to a greater extreme, resulting in a widening gap between the orthodox reformed faith (as outlined in the reformed confessions) and the Groninger teachings; this even resulted in dissent within the Groninger persuasion.²²⁰

2.7.1.2 SUPERNATURALISM AND MODERNISM

During the 1840s, academics became increasingly convinced that Supernaturalism had proven inadequate as an intellectualist response to the questions that Rationalism had raised within the sphere of religion. C. W. Opzoomer, professor of philosophy in Utrecht, struck the final nail in the coffin when he argued that appeal to a conviction of the conscience cannot verify a truth claim. Supernaturalists were now forced to choose: either they had to relinquish their convictions concerning the supernatural or they had to underpin their convictions concerning the supernatural in a different way.

The first path was chosen by what became known as **Modernism**. Modernism only accepts that which is rational and verifiable. Modernism does not hold to a particular set of doctrines, instead it

²¹⁸ Huizinga speaks of “almost unlimited hegemony” between 1840 and 1865 (Huizinga, “Groninger Richting”, 157).

²¹⁹ See Vree, “Kraaienplaag”. Membership of these associations was not limited to ministers of the NHK.

²²⁰ For literature on Groningers see 2.5.1.

holds to a particular method in seeking the truth: something must be verifiable if it is to be believable. As a result, certain truths (e.g. the bodily ascension of Christ) are excluded from the possible doctrines held. From 1848 to 1850, J. H. Scholten, professor in Leiden, published his *De Leer van de Hervormde Kerk*, in which he attempted to defend Reformed points of doctrine through the working of the *ratio* (which he called “the testimony of the Spirit”) within an idealistic framework. His type of Modernism is frequently referred to as **Idealistic Modernism**. The ink of Scholten’s work had barely dried when Opzoomer switched from Idealism to Empiricism. Though Scholten remained an Idealist, younger Modernists followed Opzoomer. Thus one sees the emergence of **Empirical Modernism** during the late 1850s. Among Modernist theologians, the Empirical version became more popular than the Idealistic version. However, the influence of Modernism within the NHK during the 1850s was limited, partly because during these years Modernists did not organize themselves into a school.²²¹

2.7.1.3 THE APOLOGIST SCHOOL

It was noted above that due to Opzoomer’s criticism, Supernaturalists were forced to choose between relinquishing their convictions and underpinning their convictions in a different way. The latter path was chosen by what became known as the **Apologist School**. Instead of appealing to reason as the foundation of the truth, they accepted Scripture as an accurate historical account, and via rational, historical arguments, defended traditionally accepted teachings. This school was strongly shaped by its attempt to defend the reliability of Scripture over against the recently popularised version of David Strauss’ *Das Leben Jesu* by the Empirical Modernist, Rev. C. Busken Huet of the Walloon church in Haarlem. Because of their orthodox dogmatic convictions, Apologists were generally considered in their time to belong to the conservative camp of the NHK. In fact, this school only consisted of two persons, the Rotterdam ministers J. J. van Oosterzee and J. I. Doedes. Though they were editors of the prominent journal, *Yearbook for Theological Science* (1845-1857), their influence during the late 1840s and 1850s was rather limited.²²²

2.7.1.4 ETHICALISM

A fourth theological current was what has been termed **Ethicalism**. Like Groningers, Ethicals were anti-intellectualist. They argued that truth is not found in “statements” but in “experience,” and thus they emphasized “life” over “doctrine.” In their early period, Ethicals tended to be orthodox in doctrine. With respect to the doctrinal struggle within the NHK they were pacifist, hence they referred to themselves as Ethical-Irenicals. Ethicalism in fact became the doctrinal

²²¹ On Modernism in general see Roessingh, *Moderne Theologie*; Brouwer, *Moderne Richting*; Haitjema, *Richtingen*, 36-49; Fiolet, *Onrust*, 59-96; Rasker, *De NHK vanaf 1795*, 112-124. For the philosophical background see Sassen, *Wijsbegeerte*, 314-348. On Opzoomer’s switch Sassen notes that Opzoomer’s empiricism is not to be confused with that of English and French Positivism (Sassen, *Wijsbegeerte*, 314, 321). The difference lies in Opzoomer’s view of the sensual (spiritual) world. On the strength of Idealistic Modernism see Brillenburg Wurth, *Scholten*, 184. For the persons relevant to my study, Wurth only lists A. Kuenen as a true follower of Scholten.

²²² The school in general was also known as the Biblical School, the Utrechtian School (not to be confused with the Utrechtian Theology today) and the modern Supernaturalist School. To avoid confusing the two forms of Supernaturalism the older form is often referred to as Rationalist Supernaturalism, the newer form as Apologetical Supernaturalism (see Schram, *Doedes*, 88-89). On the school as such there is no publication, but there are two works on the two individuals: Schram, *Doedes* and Van Rhijn, *Van Oosterzee*. See also Aalders, *Ethisch*, 32-34. Doedes and Van Oosterzee had been friends since their student days, they had even assisted each other with the writing of their dissertations.—Note that printers seem frequently to have been confused by Doedes’ initials; for example in the Acts of Synods he is often referred to as J. J. Doedes instead of J. I. Doedes.—On the reception of Strauss in The Netherlands see Obbink, *Strauss*. The influence of the Apologetical school was so limited that a general church history such as that of Rasker barely mentions them. With respect to the issue of confessional subscription especially Doedes is important. The stance of the Apologetical School deserves more attention than they were given by Fiolet (who lists only one publication by Doedes in his bibliography).

rootstock onto which were grafted the anti-formalism of I. da Costa and the pacifism of Rev. N. Beets. As such, Ethicalism absorbed many Medical Calvinists. During the 1850s, Ethicals were very influential in the ministerial association known by the name *Ernst en Vrede* (*Sincerity and Peace*). The most prominent figure within Ethicalism at this time was the Walloon Rev. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, originally of Leeuwarden and after 1848 of the university city Leiden. He exercised great influence via the journal of this association, also entitled *Ernst en Vrede*. Because Ethicals refused out of principle to form into a school, their influence was limited and their circle lacked homogeneity.²²³

2.7.1.5 SECEDERS AND JURIDICAL CALVINISTS

Previous chapters described the fifth and sixth schools of thought that were prominent in reflection on confessional subscription during this period: the **Juridical Calvinists** and the **Seceders**. The two can be distinguished in their views of the NHK. In distinction from the Ethicals (who argued that one should appeal to the conscience of false teachers so that they leave of their own accord) Juridical Calvinists argued that one should apply doctrinal discipline to oust false teachers. The Seceders, on the other hand, argued that one should leave the NHK because it is a false church. During the 1850s, the distinction between the Apologist School and Juridical Calvinism was not clear, only in later years did it become apparent that there was a substantial difference on the doctrine of Scripture.

2.7.1.6 SUMMARY

In summary, Groningers were anti-intellectualist and increasingly heterodox, Modernists were intellectualist and radically heterodox, Apologists were intellectualist and quasi-orthodox, Ethicals were anti-intellectualist and orthodox. Within the conservative camp, Ethicals, Orthodox Calvinists and the Seceders can be distinguished by their views of what action should be taken, given the doctrinal situation within the NHK. With respect to the conservative camp, it should be noted that the description above applies especially during the late 1850s. Between 1845 and 1855 the lines were less distinct. During this period, Traditional Calvinists dropped out of the debate on confessional subscription.

Theological School of Thought	Position on the role of <i>ratio</i>	Relationship to reformed doctrine	Position on reformation of the NHK
Groninger Theology	Anti-intellectualist	Increasingly heterodox	The NHK is fine the way it is.
Modernism	Intellectualist	Radically heterodox	There should be more doctrinal liberty in the NHK.
Apologetical School	Intellectualist	Quasi-orthodox	The heterodox should be forced to leave by application of doctrinal discipline
Ethicalism	Anti-intellectualist	Orthodox	The heterodox should be convinced to leave by appealing to their conscience
Juridical-Calvinism	Moderately intellectualist	Orthodox	The heterodox should be forced to leave by application of doctrinal discipline
Seceders	Moderately intellectualist	Strongly Orthodox	The orthodox should leave the NHK because it has become a false church

Table 2.7.1.6: Theological schools of thought of the 1840s and 1850s classified according to several key points

2.7.2 EVENTS AND PUBLICATIONS

During the mid-nineteenth century, a quiet revolution took place in The Netherlands. Slowly but surely political liberalism gained the upper hand in the chambers of government. In 1840, King

²²³ On Ethicalism in general see Van der Sluis, *Ethische Richting*; Haitjema, *Richtingen*, 50-73; Fiolet, *Onrust*, 143-172; Aalders, *Ethisch*. On the role of Chantepie de la Saussaye see Bavinck, *Chantepie de la Saussaye*; Brouwer, *Chantepie de la Saussaye* (esp. 178-203); Rasker, *De NHK vanaf 1795*, 125-138.

William I felt obliged to abdicate, and his son, William II, acceded to the throne. On July 1, 1842, the government proclaimed that all changes respecting ecclesiastical affairs must in the future proceed from the church. The government thus relinquished its *jus circa sacra* and enacted the full separation of church and state for the Dutch people. The NHK, liberated from all governmental interference, was now free to make its own way. In 1848, a revision of the national constitution embedded this decision in the official papers of The Netherlands.

Within the church, the need was felt in various quarters for a general revision of the regulations. Times were changing and, as a Dutch proverb would have it, when the tide changes the buoys have to be repositioned. This section reviews the revision of AR-1816 (2.7.2.1) and publications within the conservative camp (2.7.2.2-5) and the liberal camp (2.7.2.6-7).²²⁴ Following this, attention is paid to several publications of Doedes (2.7.2.8). Attempts to thwart the installation of two very unorthodox ministers receives due attention (2.7.2.9). Then there is an outline of how the conservative camp splintered organizationally during the 1850s (2.7.2.10) and a review of two key publications from the Ethical Movement (2.7.2.11). In closing, the practice of confessional subscription among the Seceders during the period (2.7.2.12) is considered.

2.7.2.1 REVISION OF AR-1816²²⁵

The revision of AR-1816 that culminated in AR-1852 was a momentous work. It spanned several years and, from a procedural point of view, did not take place smoothly. This section begins by describing the course of events (2.7.2.1.1) and evaluating them (2.7.2.1.2), appending an excursus on structures and terminology under AR-1852. There follows an outline of how the various regulations were amended, which took at least another fifteen years (2.7.2.1.3).

2.7.2.1.1 The Course of Events

Within a year of the government's decision to decrease its influence in ecclesiastical affairs, the synod decided to change the procedure for amending the regulations. In 1843, AR art.15 was rephrased in such a way that the royal assent for a change in the regulations was no longer necessary. All ecclesiastical legislative power was now solely in the hands of synods.²²⁶ It is rather remarkable that this change received official royal assent, yet the synod neglected to seek the approbation of the provincial boards. This is remarkable, since the first was no longer necessary but the second was prescribed.

Synod 1846 decided that it would be beneficial for the church to create an entirely new set of regulations. The ASC was mandated to write a first draft, and in 1847 the ASC duly presented a new draft of the AR to synod. In this proposal, the article on the main purpose of church board members, AR art. 9, had been moved, unchanged, to AR art. 14. The synod decided, however, to postpone decisions on this AR for a year.²²⁷

In 1848, King William II suddenly swung from politically conservative to liberal. In line with this policy change, the government adopted a new Dutch constitution that enshrined, among others things, the principle of total separation of church and state. In view of this, a whole new AR was drafted, more in keeping with the spirit of the times. The problematic phrase "maintenance of their doctrine" in the old AR art. 9 was exchanged for "the maintenance and promotion of the evangelical confession of the Reformed Church," and could be found in the draft AR art. 5.

²²⁴ From this point on I will use the term "conservative" to refer to those who advocated the traditional teachings of the Reformed as found in the Reformed confessions. The term "liberal" refers to those who deviated from the fundamentals of these teachings.

²²⁵ See Prins, *Kerkrecht NHK*, 72-77; Fabius, *Het Reglement van [18]52*, 113-341; Rullmann, *Kerkherstel*, 67-70; Haitjema, *NH Kerkrecht*, 52-64; Volger, *Leer*, 221-232; Rasker, *De NHK vanaf 1795*, 155-158, 162; Oostenbrink-Evers, *KO-1951*, 35-36; Vree, "Herziening AR (1846-1852)".

²²⁶ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1843:127-128 (decision), 219 (king's approval).

²²⁷ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1846:78-79. *Handelingen...NHK...* 1847:105-156 (report), 174-175 (decision).

Historical Part

Explanatory notes on this draft made clear that the word “confession” was chosen in favour of “doctrine” because the church has always *confessed* its faith, and preference was given to the insertion of the term “evangelical” because the authority of this confession is not human but that of the Gospel. Synod provisionally adopted this draft AR in that same year.²²⁸ It can be observed that the switch from “doctrine” to “confession” constitutes further evidence that synods advocated subscription to the attitude a confession represented, rather than the substance of the Reformed confessions themselves.

On March 17, 1849, King William II passed away and was succeeded by his son, William III. Although William III personally preferred a politically active monarchy, changes introduced by his father were upheld by a parliament dominated by liberals. Hence the separation of church and state was retained. Synods continued with attempts to revise the regulations.

The decision of Synod 1848, however, which for the first time consulted church councils in relation to changes in the regulations, met with much protest from the church councils. Two of the points raised concerned AR art. 15. Firstly, AR art. 15 gave a synod the power to amend articles, but many submissions viewed the provisionally adopted regulations of 1848 as more than a mere amendment. Secondly, many submissions questioned whether a synod was authorized to make the changes it was proposing. Because the change made to AR art. 15 was never submitted to the provincial boards for approbation, its legitimacy was questioned. Moreover, some submissions objected to the contents of the new regulations, including the newly proposed AR art. 5. Synod 1849 decided that the change made to AR art. 15 in 1843 had been legitimate, and dismissed objections voiced on this point. Given all the protests, the synod decided not to continue with AR-1848. Instead, it drafted a whole new proposal and sent this to the provincial boards, who were requested to send their reactions to the ASC. The ASC was to make use of the drafts of 1847 and 1848 together with the comments of the provincial boards, and come with an entirely new proposal at an extraordinary synod to be convened in April of 1850.²²⁹

The ASC duly convened an extraordinary synod, which considered two matters: the relationship between church and state and the new AR. With respect to the latter, the ASC’s proposal was rather moderate in the changes it proposed. For example, the text of AR-1816 art. 9 had been returned almost unchanged, now embodied in AR art. 13. Synod proceeded to discuss the AR article by article. Those articles that were adopted with nothing more than cosmetic changes were considered confirmed texts. Those articles that were adopted with essential changes were provisionally adopted and sent to the provincial boards for comment. In July of the same year the ordinary synod was convened and the AR as a whole was reconsidered. The Groninger professor W. Muurling moved to have AR art. 13 removed altogether, but his motion was not carried. The new AR was adopted and sent back to the provincial boards for comment.²³⁰

The AR was debated again in 1851, this time in light of the general comments of the provincial boards. Concerning AR art. 13 on the duties of church board members, a number of changes were proposed. All the proposed changes evince liberal inclinations, and no proposals were made to make the text of the article more conservative.

²²⁸ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1848:136-137 (decision not to use 1847 proposal), 166-200 (proposal + commentary), 221-274 (discussion and decision).

²²⁹ On AR art. 15 see *Handelingen...NHK...* 1849:384-386 (report), 392 (decision). On AR-1848 see *Handelingen...NHK...* 1849:388-391 (report), 416-419 (discussion), 452-461 (revised report), 491-494 (discussion), 503-505, 508-511, 513-521 (decisions incl. the text of the provisionally adopted AR).—The ASC was also mandated to draft a General Regulations for the Management of Ecclesiastical Goods.

²³⁰ *Handelingen...NHK...Buitengewone Vergadering*, 1850:24-25, 32 (procedural decisions), 22-34, 40-46 (deliberations), 47-52 (final form). (In the copy of the Acts I consulted these acts are found bound *behind* those of the Ordinary Synod of 1850, held beginning in July.) *Handelingen...NHK...* 1850:88-94 (ASC proposal), 100-130 (ASC draft of AR), 385-404 (report), 448-490 (discussion), 544-570 (provisionally adopted version).

Historical Part

The advisory committee suggested that the synod first discuss a number of issues before debating the AR article by article. The majority of synod members favoured this approach. One of the issues debated was the retention or deletion of AR art. 13. On two successive days the vote tied over this issue. As a result, the synod decided to discuss emendations to AR art. 13. Six emendations were proposed from the floor, five concerning “maintenance of their doctrine” and one suggesting changing “Christianity” to “Christian Church”. Only the last emendation was actually adopted. Once the discussion on all the points raised by the advisory committee had been finalized, the advisory committee redrafted the AR. The article had now become AR art. 11. This new draft was put to the vote and adopted. In the meantime, the synod had decided that the provincial boards would have to be consulted again on a number of points. However, retention of the old AR art. 9 in the present AR art. 11 was not among the points listed. After a recess of a few weeks, synod was reconvened to adopt the AR in final reading. In March 1852, King William III gave the new AR royal assent, though constitutionally such was no longer necessary. Thus on May 1, 1852, the new AR came into force. The intention was to bring the specific regulations into line with the AR as quickly as possible, and then to take the time to revise each of them.²³¹

2.7.2.1.2 Evaluative Remarks

AR 1852 might be considered the regulation of the full separation of church and state. However, it would be wrong to consider it the liberation of the church. G. Groen van Prinsterer noted that the state’s creation had now become the state’s inheritance. A. Kuyper is alleged to have said that the bird that had been caged in 1816 was now free from its cage but chained to its perch. Moreover, the reform had not strictly followed the path prescribed by the regulations in force.²³²

AR 1852 was in fact an application of liberalization and individualization to the NHK. In keeping with the times, ecclesiastical oligarchy was slowly but surely replaced with ecclesiastical democracy (though the “*demos*” were primarily the ministers²³³). This is not only visible in the regulations as such—for example, in the fact that the bottom-up structure replaced the top-down structure, and in the increased influence of the classical associations. It is also evident in the call for synods more accurately to reflect in their constitution the various currents in the church and the struggle of each synod with the unpredictable outcome of majority votes during its sessions. The next few decades would see the NHK enter an identity crisis of no small magnitude.

NHK—AR-1852 art. 11

The care for the concerns, of both the Christian Church in general as well as the Hervormde in particular, the maintenance of their doctrine, the increase of religious knowledge, the furtherance of Christian morals, the preservation of order and unity in action, and the promotion of love for King and Fatherland, should always be the main goal of all, who in their various relations, are endowed with ecclesiastical government.

²³¹ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1851:232-260 (proposed changes), 260-264 (advisory report), 293-298, 303-362 (discussion), 362-386 (second draft), 469-474, 525-533 (further deliberations), 533-558 (final adoption including text of the new AR), 571-572 (stipulations regarding the introduction of the AR). The advisory committee consisted of P. Hofstede de Groot, H. A. van der Ven, J. C. van der Meer Mohr, J. F. C. Kronenburg, and J. W. Suringar. The five emendations on doctrine were: (1) “Doctrine” becomes “confession”; (2) “their doctrine” becomes “of the Gospel-doctrine”; (3) “Doctrine” becomes “confession according to the Gospel”; (4) insert after “doctrine” the phrase “according to the Gospel”; and (5) “their doctrine” becomes “of the doctrine of the Gospel.”

²³² See Rullmann, *Kerkherstel*, 68-69 over against Reitsma and Lindeboom, *Geschiedenis*, 451. See also Haitjema, *NH Kerkrecht*, 53-54.

²³³ Vree, “Herziening AR (1846-1852)”, 58.

2.7.2.1.2a Excursus: Aspects of the AR-1852 Pertinent to this Study²³⁴

By way of excursus there follows a brief overview of those articles of AR-1852 that are important for a proper understanding of the events that followed. The NHK had become a complicated bureaucratic machine, and ecclesiastical reflection on doctrinal freedom frequently became entangled in the regulations that were supposed to ensure order and peace in the church. Early insight into the regulated procedure will make it easier to follow the historical overview presented in the rest of this and several following chapters.

Two types of assemblies in the NHK were recognized by the AR-1852. There were the official assemblies (church council, classical church board, provincial church board and synod) and the advisory and executive assemblies (ring, classical association and ASC). This overview will begin at the local level and slowly draw the circle wider.

The local church, that is to say, the church in a particular municipality,²³⁵ was governed by a **church council**. AR-1852 art. 19 stipulated that there were two types of church councils. The general church council consisted of the minister(s), elders and deacons. In churches with more than three ministers²³⁶ the particular church council consisted of the ministers plus elders. AR-1852 art. 23 stipulated that the congregation has the right to appoint elders and deacons and to call ministers. Because there were no regulations as yet to put this into practice, the same article stipulated that the present practice would be continued until such regulations did exist. (Cf. 2.8.2.13.)

A **ring** was the group of ministers in a larger city or in a town with the villages surrounding it. The rings were primarily responsible for assisting churches that were vacant. In 1844, a parallel organization of ministerial associations was formed. These were private organizations, not always consisting exclusively of ministers serving in the NHK. Initially the church boards were averse to the existence of these ministerial associations.²³⁷

In Dutch church polity, the term “classis” refers to a meeting of several churches in one region. AR-1852 had created two associations that functioned as classis. The **classical association (CA)** consisted of all ministers, and the elders delegated to it, providing that the number of elders did not exceed the number of ministers (AR-1852 art. 38). The classical association was primarily a think tank and administrative body. Its main task was to appoint the members of the classical and provincial church boards (AR-1852 artt. 37, 40).

The **classical church board (CB)** consisted of five or more ministers and one elder for every two ministers (AR-1852 art. 41). Its concern was discipline and order in the church. It was given the power to suspend ministers, candidates, elders and deacons, and was the body that examined religious instructors (AR-1852 artt. 43, 45).

In keeping with the political structure of The Netherlands, the classical regions were grouped into provinces. The **provincial church board (PB)** consisted of one or more minister(s) per classis and for every two ministers one elder (AR-1852 art. 48). Its priority was also discipline and order, primarily as a first court of appeal. It had the duty to examine candidates for the ministry and had the power to depose ministers, candidates, elders and deacons (AR-1852 artt. 51, 53).²³⁸

At the top of this structure stood the **synod**. It consisted of one minister from every provincial board, one minister from the Walloon Committee, one minister from the ecclesiastical board of Limburg, one minister from the Committee for the Colonies (Churches of the Dutch Indies), and three elders. The secretary and treasurer were advisory members.²³⁹ Other advisory members were

²³⁴ See Van Oosterzee, *Kerkregt*, 71-124.

²³⁵ In principle each municipality, however large, had one church. In large cities it meant that the one church owned more than one church building, had thousands of members and often many ministers. For example, in 1850 the church at The Hague had 35 000 members, was served by 10 ministers and made use of 3 church buildings (Posthumus Meyjes, *'s-Gravenhage*, 101).

²³⁶ Statistics reveal that the ratio ministers to members in the NHK around 1852 was in the order of 1 : 1000. In larger churches the ratio tended to be even higher.

²³⁷ See Vree, "Kraaijenplaag", 110-112.

²³⁸ The Walloon (French speaking) churches continued to have their own church board which had the rights and duties of both the classical and provincial board.

²³⁹ The secretary had to be minister in The Hague, the treasurer member in Amsterdam.

Historical Part

the professors, one from each of the three theological faculties (Leiden, Utrecht and Groningen). On account of the fact that the treasurer was only present when financial matters were discussed, the number of deliberating synod members could be as high as 20 (AR-1852 art. 56). In 1873, three elders were added to the number, bringing the total number of voting members to 19 and deliberating members to 23. In 1878, the number of professorial advisors was reduced from 3 to 2. AR-1852 art. 61 stipulated that the synod is the supreme body in the NHK. In situations of discipline, the matter was discussed by a **synod contracta**, consisting of half the number of advisory and voting members of synod, selected by lot.

Because synod was not a permanent body, the practice begun in 1827 was continued and a standing committee was appointed. The **ASC** consisted of the president, vice-president and secretary of synod, three other ministers, three elders and one professor: ten members in all. The secretary and professor were advisory members (AR-1852 art. 67). The ASC was accorded limited synodical powers (AR-1852 art. 70) and frequently functioned as a preparatory body. Each annual synod was to approve the activities of the ASC.

Finally, the AR-1852 stipulated that a person could not be a member of a synod, provincial board or classical board at the same time. Previously this had been the case, and thus a single individual as, for example, member of a CB, a PB and the synod, could exert great influence. Thus the influence of an individual was restricted.

Because much of the reflection on doctrinal freedom was directly related to changes to the regulations, it is helpful to have some insight into how the regulations could be amended. Proposals could be made to a synod in a number of ways; members of a synod were even free to table their own private proposals during the meeting. These proposals would be studied by an advisory committee, which would present the synod with an advice. The synod then discussed the changes. If a vote tied on an issue, there was to be another vote on the issue the following day. If the vote tied again, a new attempt was made to discuss the issue and seek another solution. At the end of a debate and successful voting, the synod determined a draft text, which was provisionally adopted. Subsequently, this text was submitted to the provincial boards (and later also the classical associations) for comment. Their comments were not binding. At the next synod, the provisionally adopted texts were reconsidered in the light of the comments received, and changes were made. If a synod decided the changes were cosmetic (not substantive), the text was considered “confirmed” and sent to the provincial boards for approbation. If the changes were considered substantive and new, the article was again provisionally adopted and the whole process started again. If a majority of the roughly 70 provincial church board *members* were not against a confirmed text,²⁴⁰ the ASC adopted the articles in final reading on behalf of the synod and proclaimed them, usually in January of the following year. For complete new sets of regulations and changes to the AR-1852, a two-thirds majority was required; for changes to other existing regulations, an absolute majority. Altogether, the process from initiating a discussion on changing the regulations to its coming into force could take at least one and a half years.

In summary, there were four official ecclesiastical bodies and three with advisory powers. The bodies that play a pivotal role in decisions on the issue of doctrinal freedom are primarily the classical associations, provincial church boards and synod.

2.7.2.1.3 Revision of the Specific Regulations (REX, ROT, SRK and RG)

One of the first sets of specific regulations to be submitted to a thorough revision was that concerning the examination of candidates, known as REX. A new REX was drafted and presented by the ASC in 1853. Relevant to this study is REX art. 38, the article containing the form of subscription. Not only had REX art. 38 been moved to REX art. 29, but the article had also undergone some extensive revision. The synod further revised the text as proposed by the ASC. The more relevant changes made to FS-1816 were as follows:

²⁴⁰ The precise wording of this regulation ran as follows: “a decision is rejected if a majority of provincial board members is against the decision.” (AR art. 62). This meant that in the situation of a tied vote amongst provincial board members the new regulation was enforced.

Historical Part

“in conscience acknowledging and believing” became “accept with our whole heart and uprightly believe;”

“in agreement with the spirit and the main substance of the confession” became “the spirit and the main substance of the doctrine.”

After some discussion on the REX, it was provisionally adopted and sent to the provincial boards for comment.²⁴¹

However, the churches at large believed the issue worthy of more deliberation. The reactions from the provincial boards varied from “remove the form of subscription” through “make it shorter” to “no change whatsoever.” Four submissions from other quarters also reached synod’s table, requesting the synod not to change or to postpone changes to FS-1816. In view of all the comments, the advisory committee drafted a new REX, and the form of subscription now moved to REX art. 28. Once the discussion of the form was completed phrase by phrase, REX art. 28 as a whole was put to the vote and unanimously adopted. Because of other changes made to the REX, the advisory committee drafted a (second) new proposal. The form of subscription moved, unchanged, to REX art. 27. Synod subsequently confirmed the REX as a whole.²⁴² Considering that the majority of provincial board members approved the REX (PBs Utrecht and Friesland objected to the form of subscription), the ASC adopted the REX in final reading and proclaimed it on January 1, 1855.²⁴³ The NHK now had a new form of subscription (FS-1852), its third since 1619.

Especially worth noting in FS-1852 is the phrase “foundational principle.” It is clear that the musings of Donker Curtius and Hofstede de Groot—and, as will soon be made clear, Scholten—had found their way into the regulations of the church. What FS-1852 failed to outline is what this foundational principle actually was, and the acts of the synod do not make this clear either.

The next change to specific regulations relevant to this present study occurred in 1856. Among the regulations confirmed in that year were those for Supervision and Discipline (ROT) and the Synodical Regulations for Church Councils (SRK). The articles that played a limited role in

NHK—FS-1852 (= REX art. 27)

In addition, those examined have to make the following solemn declaration or promise and confirm it with their signature:

We, the undersigned, having been admitted by the provincial church board of (or by the committee for the matters of the Walloon churches) to the public ministry of the gospel in the Nederlandsche Hervormde Kerk, hereby declare uprightly that we, in accordance with the foundational principle of the Christian Church in general and the Hervormde in particular, accept with our whole heart and uprightly believe God’s holy Word, contained in the writings of the Old and New Covenants; that it is our intention and desire to faithfully maintain the spirit and the main substance of the doctrine, which is contained in the adopted forms of unity of the Nederlandsche Hervormde Kerk; that we therefore will earnestly and heartily in accordance with the gifts given us proclaim to the congregation the whole counsel of God, in particular his grace in Jesus Christ as the only ground for salvation; that with all diligence we will seek the furtherance of religious knowledge, of Christian faith and life and will defend and foster order and harmony; and that we will thus, with eyes raised to the help which is from above, carefully promote the interests of God’s Kingdom and in particular those of the Nederlandsche Hervormde Kerk and, according to our capabilities, co-operate in their furtherance; we bind ourselves by this our signature to all the afore-written and so that, should we be found to have acted against any part of this declaration and promise, herewith will submit ourselves to the decisions of the authorised ecclesiastical assemblies.

²⁴¹ *Bijlagen...Handelingen...NHK...* 1853:B.35-47; *Handelingen...NHK...* 1853:145-151 (report), 199-201, 204-209 (deliberation and decision).

²⁴² *Handelingen...NHK...* 1854:76-77, 86-87 (report), 224-225 (deliberation and decisions), 270-271 (revised draft), 272 (decision). The advisory committee consisted of W. A. van Hengel, A. C. de Meijer, and J. A. van Walsem.

²⁴³ *Bijlagen...Handelingen...NHK...* 1855:B.75. Although most Forms of subscription are referred to by their year of proclamation, this particular form is usually referred to as the Form of 1852. I will follow this practice and refer to this Form as FS-1852.

Historical Part

the discussions of the next few decades were ROT art. 3 (the extent of ecclesiastical supervision and discipline) and SRK art. 21 (the tasks of the minister), art. 22 (ministers and the worship service), and art. 23 (ministers, the congregation, and the regulations). Noteworthy also is the removal from this SRK of the obligation to weekly catechism preaching. Both these regulations came into force on July 1, 1857.²⁴⁴

Three years later in 1860, the Regulations for Religious Education (RG) were revised. This set of regulations receives attention for two reasons. First of all, it contained a form of subscription for religious instructors. This form was, *mutatis mutandis*, identical to FS-1852. Secondly, it stipulated the procedure for admitting members to the NHK. This latter set of stipulations caused much unrest and dissension within the NHK between 1870 and 1887, and in fact precipitated the church schism of 1886 and 1887.

It took the synod two years to finalize the text for the RG. The main sticking point proved to be the procedure to be followed for the admission of new members. In their final edition these articles read as follows:

RG art. 38: Admittance of members takes place on behalf of the church council. No one resident in another congregation is admitted as member without permission from the church council of his own congregation. Admittance as member is preceded by an examination of the gained knowledge of the Christian faith and morals, biblical history and church history, especially that of the Reformation; secondly, if this knowledge be found adequate, a profession of faith is to be made by the admittees. This all takes place under the guidance of a minister, assisted by one or more elders.

RG art. 39: The confirmation of members takes place in a worship service dedicated hereto, where they shall be asked to answer the following or similar questions:

In the presence of God and His congregation I ask you:

1. Do you confess to believe in God the Father, the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only-begotten Son, our Lord, and in the Holy Spirit?
2. Is it your intention and desire to persevere by this confession through God's grace, to abandon sin, to strive towards sanctification and faithfully follow your Saviour in prosperity and adversity, in life and in death, as befits His true confessors?
3. Do you promise to co-operate in the flourishing of God's Kingdom in general and the NHK in particular, by keeping by her regulations, to the extent that you are able?

Once they have answered positively to these questions they are declared members with a solemn and fitting address.²⁴⁵

Thus the various specific regulations were brought in line with the newly adopted AR-1852. It is remarkable how few obstacles synods encountered in this revision of the AR and particular regulations. Conservatives let this golden opportunity to discuss the place of doctrine in the church pass them by, and liberals did not really take their chance. Could it be that neither party realized the extent to which the liberalization and democratization of the NHK could be used to advance their cause? Could it be because both the conservatives and the liberals were internally divided, and were concerned with discussions of a dogmatic rather than church political nature?

²⁴⁴ On the ROT: *Handelingen...NHK...* 1856:116-136 (report), 141-142, 154-155, 176-179, 221-222 (deliberations), 222-238 (confirmed text). On the SRK: *Handelingen...NHK...* 1856:93-103 (report), 113-115, 136-137, 140-141, 179-180 (deliberations), 209, 261-269 (confirmed text). On both: *Handelingen...NHK...* 1857:Bijlage B.14.

²⁴⁵ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1861:211-227 (report), 298-300, 324-326, 350-360 (deliberation and decisions); *Bijlage...Handelingen...NHK...* 1862:B.52 (proclamation). See also Douwes, *Storm*, 7-9.

Undoubtedly these factors played a role. A factor that certainly played a role was a loss of faith in synods within the conservative camp, especially after the events of 1854 (see 2.7.2.9).²⁴⁶

However, we return to consideration of the events of 1848.

2.7.2.2 JURIDICAL CALVINISM: G. GROEN VAN PRINSTERER

During the 1840s, two rather informal associations had formed within the conservative camp. The first, known as the *Christelijke Vrienden*, consisted of ministers and non-ministers drawn from the NHK and various other churches. The second was strictly ministerial, without a name but usually referred to as “*De Klomp*,” this being the name of the place where they met. Both associations consisted of conservatives drawn from a wide spectrum whose views on reforming the church ranged from the medical to the juridical methods. Whereas the ministerial “*De Klomp*” tended to be more medical, the mixed membership of the *Christelijke Vrienden* seems to have been fairly evenly spread in its views.

During the course of 1847 Groen published a series of articles in *De Vereeniging: Christelijke Stemmen*, the official organ of the *Christelijke Vrienden*. He entitled the series “The Forms and the Rights of the *Hervormde* Persuasion.”²⁴⁷ His primary aim was to overcome the differences between himself and Da Costa by demonstrating that the juridical and medical ways of reform need not be mutually exclusive. Da Costa responded privately to Groen after the publication of each instalment, and from this correspondence it appears that Da Costa became persuaded that Groen was right: the two positions were not mutually exclusive. Groen was conciliatory and conceded on points he did not consider crucial. For example, because Da Costa adamantly objected to the use of the term “forms,” preferring the term “confession,” Groen dropped the term from the title of his articles when they were published as a booklet entitled “The Rights of the *Hervormde* Persuasion.” For, he noted, within the scheme of the rights of the *Hervormde* Persuasion, the (Three) Forms (of Unity) functioned only as historical proof for what the doctrine of the *Hervormde Kerk* was.

Groen’s argument convinced Da Costa that the Juridical and Medical Calvinists were indeed closer to each other than he had previously thought.²⁴⁸ As such, this is a key document in the course of reflection on confessional subscription, and can be considered the second manifesto of the Juridical Calvinists.

In Groen’s writing, the natural line of argument is all but gone. Groen emphatically denied that the church has a democratic character, and, in line with this, he no longer drew a parallel between the state and the church. Could it be that Da Costa, given his aversion to the social contract, had convinced Groen that the church should not be viewed simply as a “spiritual” democratic state with the confessions as its constitution?

According to Groen, the confessions are not the life principle of the church but its autobiography. He defined an evangelical confession as follows:

a confession of and for the moment, at the same time a record of permanent results; the proof of victory, generally after difficult struggle; the slowly-ripened fruit of developing research of Scripture and faith which, through the clearly to be recognized blessing of God, has gained the upper hand.

²⁴⁶ Vree suggests that the reason may have been because conservatives and Groningers matched each other in influence, and were eventually driven into each others arms on account of common enemies, especially the juridical Calvinists (Vree, “Herziening AR (1846-1852)”, 58).**

²⁴⁷ In Dutch: *De Formulieren en het Regt der Hervormde Gezindheid*. The term “*Regt*” (in the sense of “*goed recht*”) is used here without specification, hence I have chosen to translate it with a plural.

²⁴⁸ During the 1850s Da Costa would argue that he had been wrong. See Nauta, *Verbindende kracht*, 34-46, who entitles his third chapter which discusses this debate “Groen’s stance overrules,” therewith correctly indicating that this was not a matter of compromise or persuasion but of predominance of Groen’s convictions.

Groen thus saw the confessions as milestones along the road that the church has followed through history, and along which it is to continue. He considered the Three Forms of Unity, in their main substance and essence, to be the historical and rightful confessions of the church, united with its existence. Concerning subscription Groen wrote that the bond that teachers have with these confessions lies not in subscription but in their being teachers in the NHK, just as gold is not gold because it has been assayed to be gold, but because it has the properties of gold.

The main difference between Groen and Da Costa was not really the matter of confessional subscription as such but the method of reforming the NHK. In *Het Regt* Groen made clear that juridical and medical ways to reform are not mutually exclusive but complementary. Thus Groen made clear that Juridical Calvinists were not pure formalists. Groen's suggestion that juridical and medical ways are not mutually exclusive raises the question how this might be reflected in the process of doctrinal discipline.

Related to medical and juridical reformation of the NHK are the issues of the precise nature of subscription, and the relationship between confessions and progress. With respect to the former, Groen pointed out that subscribing does not *create* a duty towards a confession but *expresses* this duty. His example that gold is not gold because it is assayed is clear enough, as is his description of confessions as milestones along the path travelled by the church. The truths of the past, Groen noted, remain valid in the present, even if the body of truth increases and our understanding thereof deepens. This point makes clear that the confessional issue is, in part, an epistemological one: what are the characteristics of a "truth"?

Further, Groen emphasized that confessions are ecclesiastical documents and thus have an ecclesiastical function. They do not prove the truth but are standards for determining whether one's convictions are in agreement with those of the church. Groen repeatedly emphasized that issues had to be kept separate. His main concern in *Het Regt* was not how *truth* should be defended against liberalism but what the relationship between liberals and the NHK should be. It would seem that many medically-inclined Calvinists, such as Beets, failed to grasp this.

Finally, while Groen could appreciate Da Costa's emphasis on the need for a confession to be "fresh," he felt that confessions were only born in a crisis, and that the time for such writing lay as yet "behind a huge mountain."²⁴⁹

2.7.2.3 THE ODEON MEETING

Groen's articles gave sufficient impetus to organize a conference. On May 17, 1848, the *Christelijke Vrienden* appointed a committee of seven persons—both medical and juridical²⁵⁰—to arrange a general meeting for all the leaders and members of the NHK. The sole aim of the meeting was to discuss possible means to achieve the restoration of the NHK on her true foundation.

The committee approached the Medical Calvinist Rev. N. Beets to chair the meeting, but he declined, declaring himself to be incompetent, unsuitable, and unwilling.²⁵¹ As a result Groen was appointed chairman.

The meeting was held on August 18 in the largest room of the building, known as the Odeon. In attendance were 33 ministers and 288 church members. Many of these had been properly delegated by church councils or associations and thus represented a much larger body within the NHK. The proceedings of these meetings were published in *De Vereeniging: Christelijke Stemmen*.

²⁴⁹ Groen van Prinsterer, *Het Regt*. The quote is from page 47.

²⁵⁰ Members of this committee were the more medically inclined I. Da Costa, Rev. O. G. Heldring and Rev. J. C. I. Secretan and the more juridically inclined Rev. J. J. Van Toorenenbergen, G. Groen van Prinsterer, A. Capadose, and Ae. Mackay.

²⁵¹ See Honders, *Doen en Laten*, 66-69.

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At the commencement of the meeting, the chairman noted that the only motive for the meeting was

the faith in those important salvific truths of revelation, of which the person and work of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ is the beginning and the end, the soul and the foundation, and in which believers have found peace and life for their souls. At all times and especially now is ecclesiastical maintenance of these truths indispensable and a daily more pressing duty.

The minutes indicate that the issues of secession, revolution, form-coercion,²⁵² and the restructuring of the church were not to be discussed during the meeting. The meeting adopted a declaration, which included the following points:

3. Doctrine has its unchangeable foundation in God's Word. Although doctrine is open to development, it can never age.
4. The existence of the church stands or falls with the maintenance of the truths on which the Christian church has always been founded.
5. It is more than clear from the history and the confessions of the NHK what her doctrine is, and that her members have the right to demand its maintenance.

Van der Kemp found this article too vague: "*which* doctrine and *what* confessions?" he asked. In response, Groen van Prinsterer noted that such a discussion would be premature. The co-operation of those present was based in their adherence to reformed doctrines, not to a particular confession. The time was not yet ripe, Groen said, to discuss the ins and outs of the doctrine of predestination, for example. Da Costa added that where there if people trust each other, it is clear which doctrines are meant.

6. This doctrine ought to be at the forefront of the Ecclesiastical Organization, and thus reference to its maintenance in AR art. 9 may not be removed.

Later during the meeting, discussion was re-opened on why the confessional issue could not be discussed. The lawyer C. M. van der Kemp wanted more specifics. This matter, the organizers announced, would be discussed when the church was ready to revise the confessions. At this stage, however, reference to the confessions merely underpinned the right of the *Hervormde* Persuasion to exist. Pursuit of the full implementation of subscription to the Three Forms of Unity at this stage would only lead to dissent and divergence, opined the organizers, who appealed for a broad-minded approach. Van der Kemp did not pursue the matter any further.²⁵³

It had further been the intention of the organizational committee that the Odeon meeting would result in local action. Such action only eventuated in The Hague (where several influential Juridical Calvinists lived) and, to an extent, in Amsterdam. Ecclesiastically, its effect was minimal since the conservatives failed to gain sufficient support within the circle of ministers, thus effectively hampering any official ecclesiastical action. However, when the *Christelijke Vrienden* folded up, new non-theological groups known as the *Waarheidsvrienden* (Friends of the Truth) were formed in various cities.²⁵⁴

The Odeon meeting would prove to have been crucial in the history of the conservative camp.²⁵⁵ Nauta claims that Groen overruled Da Costa, arguing that the co-operation in 1848 had not come about through unity in standpoint but on account of a common struggle and a common enemy.²⁵⁶ Indeed, during the Odeon meeting, the issue that would divide the conservative camp—the method of church reform—was not truly tabled or discussed. The stricter Juridicals, especially Van der Kemp and Capadose, felt cheated by this and eventually withdrew from the discussion

²⁵² In Dutch *formulierdwang*: forcing people to do things by means of forms which they have to sign.

²⁵³ Groen van Prinsterer, *Verslag 1848*. See Moet, *Van der Kemp*, 90-92.

²⁵⁴ See Rullmann, *Kerkherstel*, 62-64.

²⁵⁵ Vree actually goes a step further, considering the Odeon meeting to mark the beginning of the persuasional struggle (Vree, "Kraaijenplaag", 140).

²⁵⁶ Nauta, *Verbindende kracht*, 34-46.

altogether.²⁵⁷ The Medicals, especially the ministers, continued to be suspicious of the Juridicals, and kept their distance. Instead of giving the conservative camp a solid foundation from which to mount a united attack, the Odeon meeting, in an attempt to move the discussion from the pragmatic sphere to the sphere of principles, became a catalyst for the evolution of diverging viewpoints.

2.7.2.4 JURIDICAL CALVINISTS AND THE SECEDERS: GROEN AND VAN VELZEN

Since the 1830s, the Dutch Reformed world was no longer enclosed by the walls of the NHK. In *Het Regt*, Groen van Prinsterer accused the Seceders of making the secession a *shibboleth* for co-operation in the defence of the orthodox reformed faith. To his way of thinking, the two parties referred to as the Juridical Calvinists and the Seceders did not differ in their appreciation for the confessions. They differed only in their appreciation of each other, and the course to follow with respect to the NHK. Groen felt that the Seceders erred both in their assessment of the NHK as a false church, and in their presentation of the position of the Juridical Calvinists.²⁵⁸

Rev. S. van Velzen, one of the original Secession ministers, took it upon himself to defend the Seceders against Groen van Prinsterer. Though he was convinced that Groen and he were agreed on the theory of confessional subscription, he felt their ways diverged in the application of which confession and what in the confessions should be subscribed. They also differed on their judgment of the NHK: the Seceders saw the NHK as a pseudo-church, since it did not practise doctrinal fidelity, while Groen *cum suis* saw the NHK as a proper church, since it had not formally rejected the reformed confessions.²⁵⁹

Groen responded to the defence by means of a public letter. One of the issues he specifically addressed was the matter of toleration. Groen pleaded for a period of amnesty for those who considered forms a threat to liberty in matters of faith.²⁶⁰

Van Velzen briefly responded to Groen's response in the epilogue to the acts of GS Amsterdam 1849. His criticism is very specific: if Groen subscribes the Belgic Confession, does this not imply having to put into practice articles 27-29 of that confession, which deal with the doctrine of the church? Unbelieving ecclesiastical authority should not be tolerated, Van Velzen argued.²⁶¹

In closing, it should be noted that in his publications Van Velzen founded the practice of confessional subscription and doctrinal discipline entirely on Scriptural data, entirely bypassing the natural line of argument. Though the Seceders had not seriously reflected on confessional subscription within their circles, it is clear that for them the matter was not just one of mere traditionalism.

2.7.2.5 THREE OTHER JURIDICAL CALVINIST PUBLICATIONS OF NOTE

There are yet three other publications from among the Juridical Calvinists to be taken note of.

In 1848 Groen wrote a booklet on the doctrinal faithfulness of the para-church Dutch Missions Association, an interconfessional missional organisation established in 1797. Groen was very unhappy about what he considered to be increasing heterodoxy within its circles. In the context of his booklet he also touched on the matter of confessional subscription, where Groen unequivocally rejects all accusations of formalism and traditionalism leveled at Juridical Calvinists. Professing one's faith, Groen wrote, is more than subscribing a confession. Professing one's faith is being

²⁵⁷ See Moet, *Van der Kemp*, 88-96; Kalmijn, *Capadose*, 262-263, 276-277.

²⁵⁸ Groen van Prinsterer, *Het Regt* (see 2.7.2.2).

²⁵⁹ Van Velzen, *Apologie*.

²⁶⁰ Groen van Prinsterer, *Aan Van Velzen*.

²⁶¹ Van Velzen, "Narede".

frank and honest where the opponent has objections, is the situation where confession comes with suffering, Groen claimed.²⁶²

In the same year, 1848, Rev. J. J. van Toorenenbergen of Vlissingen wrote an article on the relationship between the NHK and its confessions. Van Toorenenbergen was one of the organizers of the Odeon meeting, and would become a key figure in the organization of the conservative camp. His twenty-odd page publication is a typical Juridical Calvinist defence of confessional subscription, and deserves mention for two reasons. First of all, this appears to be first publication defending the Juridical Calvinist position to be written by a theologian. Secondly, Van Toorenenbergen finally came to occupy a position somewhere between the Medical and Juridical Calvinists.

Van Toorenenbergen postulated that confessions are echoes of God's speaking to us through the Spirit. Since there is no distinction between laity and clergy, God's Word is binding for all, and thus confessions apply to all. Confessions, Van Toorenenbergen argued, are not standards for faith but standards for preaching and teaching. Their authority is simply that of the church. In theory, a confession, like the church, is fallible. However, as a community in which the Spirit works, the church has a right to its own conviction and foundation. If a church is denied a confession, Van Toorenenbergen opined, it is denied the right to self-development, self-preservation, and self-defence. Accordingly, the *jus confessionis* is an inalienable right of the church. He wrote:

When the old confessions are acknowledged as confessions of faith, only the truths, the doctrines as an entity will be the point. The argumentative, apologetic and polemic elements, all temporary elements, will be subordinated to not the contents according to the spirit but the literal contents, to the doctrine IN *the Forms conformably God's Word*, CONTAINED or UNDERSTOOD, and thus there will be room and freedom with order and justice.

Van Toorenenbergen was aware that all is not said and done when confessional writings are acknowledged as they are. They are the connection with the past, but simply holding them in the future is not sufficient: development of understanding must be given a place. Over against Da Costa, Van Toorenenbergen defended a bond with confessions of the past. However, with Da Costa he pleaded strongly for new confessions as evidence of the church's growth.²⁶³

One last publication to consider is that by the lawyer C. M. van der Kemp. Van der Kemp had been unhappy with the course of events at the Odeon meeting. In 1851 he published a history of GS Dordrecht 1618-19, in which he touched on the issue of confessional subscription. This publication is one of the last key documents on the issue written by Van der Kemp, after which he more or less withdrew from the debate.²⁶⁴

Van der Kemp felt ill at ease with Groen's attempts to win over those who thought like Da Costa. Van Der Kemp argued that one cannot discuss confessionalism in abstract terms without relating matters to the documents themselves. He was especially concerned about the role played by the Canons of Dort. According to Van der Kemp, the Canons were not a confession for theologians but a Form of Unity similar to the Belgic Confession of Faith. Nevertheless, Van der Kemp did not plead for the simple re-introduction of FS-1619. However, he considered FS-1816 to be inadequate, and urged a new form of subscription whereby a signatory acknowledged the Three

²⁶² Groen van Prinsterer, *Zendinggenootschap*, 131-151.

²⁶³ Van Toorenenbergen, "In welke betrekking?" Van Toorenenbergen has a very convoluted writing style, making it difficult, at times, to understand what he is precisely saying. Especially his love for multiple negatives sometimes leave the reader guessing as to what Van Toorenenbergen's point is.

²⁶⁴ Moet suggests this was not only due to his disagreement with the Medical Calvinists, later Ethicals, but also because he himself came to hold several unorthodox convictions on baptism, the intermediate state, and pneumatology. Moreover, Van der Kemp may well have suffered from an inferiority complex. (Moet, *Van der Kemp*, 94-100, 170.)

Forms of Unity as historical proof of the doctrine espoused by the NHK. For such a subscription to function properly, Van der Kemp felt a more decentralized church polity was required than that currently in vogue: he thus pleaded for a return to CO-1619.²⁶⁵

These three publications from the Juridical Calvinist camp made clear that these Calvinists stressed confessing as a matter of content and the heart. All three indicated that a bond with the past was necessary, that development in the present and the future should not be sidelined, and that a simple return to “Dort” was not the solution to the present situation. One certainly cannot accuse the Juridical Calvinists of being formalistic or idealistic. On the other hand, it is clear from these three publications that even the Juridical Calvinists were not altogether united. They differed on the extent of tolerance, with Groen defending the middle ground, Van Toorenenbergen inclining more towards the position of the Medical Calvinists, and Van der Kemp inclining more towards that of the Seceders. Questions remained unanswered concerning the relationship between confessions and progress, as well as the relative importance of the substance of the doctrine confessed. What united the Juridical Calvinists was their conviction that the Forms of Unity had not been abolished in the NHK, and that therefore there was a mandate to continue to seek their maintenance within the NHK. As long as this was their goal, the Juridical Calvinists were united. Should this goal be lost, however, other factors could split the ranks, and it is arguable, based on these three publications, that as early as the 1840s, the Juridical Calvinist faction carried within its bosom the seeds of dissent.

2.7.2.6 MODERNISM: J. H. SCHOLTEN

In 1848, Prof. J. H. Scholten of Leiden began publishing the first edition of his dogmatics. It portrayed an entirely novel approach in the quest for the truth, and marked the conception, if not the birth, of Modernism as a new current within the NHK. For Scholten not only set himself against the conservatives, but his criticism of the Groningers was equally as strong. In the first section of his book he discussed the character of his dogmatics as a quest for the reformed truth. In doing so, he touched frequently on the issue of confessional subscription. For the purposes of this present study, the review is drawn from the fourth edition dated 1861, which differs little from earlier editions other than that Scholten in his introduction addresses criticism levelled at previous editions.

Scholten proposed two principles to which the Reformed should be bound: a formal principle and a material principle. The formal principle holds that everything should be directly derived from divine revelation. The material principle recognizes the sovereignty of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. Scholten claimed that it was through the lenses of these two principles that theologians should reflect on spiritual matters, for they form “the essence and main substance of the reformed confession.”²⁶⁶

Scholten’s approach to the issue was entirely new for the Dutch Reformed, for, in Scholten’s terms, divine revelation was not Scripture but the product of the enlightened mind. This enlightened mind was not guided by observations but by internal ideals. Methodologically, Scholten advocated a rationalist idealism, and it was through this filter that he intended to pour the doctrines of the church. He concluded that the end product would be what might properly be termed “reformed doctrine”, and such doctrine might be stated in confessions. However, only the foundational principles, rather than these doctrines themselves, would be binding. Thus Scholten linked up with and developed Donker Curtius’ notion of binding to foundational principles. Because Scholten wanted to bind to both a formal and a material principle, he advocated

²⁶⁵ Van der Kemp, *Schets*, 50-69.

²⁶⁶ Scholten, *De Leer*, vii-xi, 1-77.

subscription to the primary issue of the confession. As long as one held this primary issue (the material principle), one would be free to teach as one felt appropriate.

Scholten's ideas were important because they played a crucial role in the drafting and interpretation of FS-1852, proclaimed six years after the publication of the first volume of Scholten's work. Primarily because Scholten's formal principle was individualistic, the way had been opened up for literally anything to be declared from an NHK pulpit. Events in and after 1854 would prove how far reaching this could be.

However, before examining the events of 1854, a review of publications from another wing of the liberal camp is in order.

2.7.2.7 GRONINGER THEOLOGY: L. G. PAREAU AND E. J. DIEST LORGION

During the late 1840s and 1850s, the Groningers were at the peak of their influence within the NHK. With respect to the matter of confessional subscription, they did not leave themselves unattested. Two of their key publications are now reviewed.

The first is by Prof. L. G. Pareau, one of the original three professors in Groningen. His life is considered to mirror the rise, flourishing and fall of Groninger Theology. Pareau was also one of the most influential figures in reshaping the general regulations during the late 1840s and early 1850s. In 1851, Pareau published an article in the Groninger journal *Waarheid in Liefde* in which he reacted to Scholten's *De Leer*.

In his article, Pareau launched an all-out attack on the concept of confessional subscription. He considered doctrine, and in its wake confessions (and thus confessional subscription), to be an illegitimate leftover of Rationalism and Greek epistemology in the church. The Groningers disagreed not simply about the doctrine to which one should be bound; they disagreed with the role that doctrine played in the church as such. Adhering to doctrine was changing the church into some academic, scientific endeavour. *Doctrine*, Pareau pointed out, can mean two things: "teaching, instruction" and "a system of more or less scientifically-articulated concepts, derived from a foundational principle." The former relates to the person of Christ, the latter to the dogmatics of a church. The apostles wrote their epistles, not to build a system of doctrine but to build the church. The Reformation confessions were likewise intended to teach a message. They were not intended as propaganda for a particular doctrinal system. The essence of the NHK is not found in its doctrine but in its spirit, wrote Pareau, and added: we should not think we have the truth, but continue to seek the truth in love.²⁶⁷

The second publication is an article by Rev. E. J. Diest Lorgion, minister in Groningen. In 1854, he published an article in *Waarheid in Liefde* on the value of concepts and doctrines in the Christian church, especially whether these have the ability to unite Christians. This publication well illustrates how epistemological premises play a role in determining a position on confessional subscription.

Diest Lorgion distinguished between "representation," "notion," and "concept." A "representation" is the product of fantasy or observation, a "notion" is the product of reason, and a "concept" is the product of the mind. Concepts are based on representations and notions. Should representations or notions change, concepts change. According to Diest Lorgion, Christianity began with representations and notions. In the course of time these became doctrine, the articulation of concepts. The arrangement of doctrine forms it into a system, and adoption by the church lends it added weight. Diest Lorgion warned, however, that doctrines are no more than aids in preaching; they certainly do not form its main substance. Our concern, Diest Lorgion argued, is not with concepts of the truth but the truth itself, together with faith, hope and love, which are

²⁶⁷ Pareau, "Evangelische Opbouwning".

matters of the heart not of the mind. Not doctrine but love, Diest Lorgion concluded, is the bond that binds.

Diest Lorgion's warnings can be appreciated; particularly well made was his point that there is more to existence than reason, and thus there is more to faith than abstract articulations of supernatural reality. Given the *Sitz im Leben*, one might even understand Diest Lorgion's aversion to the confessions. However, his rejection of the confessions is therewith not yet justified. Abuse does not necessarily imply rejection. The question remains whether confessions as such are illegitimate.²⁶⁸

With this, the Groninger position on confessional subscription had reached its logical end: there should be no such thing as confessional subscription. As far as Groningers were concerned, preachers should promise to do no more than faithfully preach Christianity in order to improve the lives of people. Groninger Theology ran the risk of becoming philanthropy with a Protestant veneer, a veneer that could peel off at any moment.

2.7.2.8 THE APOLOGIST SCHOOL: J. I. DOEDES

The Revs J. J. van Oosterzee and J. I. Doedes, both of Rotterdam, together published a *Yearbook for Scientific Theology*. In its pages they wrote on all manner of issues. In 1851, Doedes proposed and defended nine theses on the doctrine of the NHK in reaction to Scholten's work.

Doedes' stance is in many ways reminiscent of Heringa's stance.²⁶⁹ Doedes more or less defended orthodox doctrines along rationalist lines. This meant that Doedes' methodology left openings for more heterodox positions, just as Heringa's Supernaturalism in the end produced the doctrinal stance taken by Donker Curtius.

A characteristic of Doedes' position on confessions was his objectification of confessions. He argued that something taught *in* the church is not necessarily taught *by* the church, and thus he distinguished sharply between dogmatics and symbolics. Interesting too is Doedes' position that confessional subscription is considered to be an issue of what one *teaches*, not what one personally *believes*. In theory, it would then be possible for no one to believe in the divinity of Jesus but this could still be the confession of the NHK as long as preachers still—at odds with their own convictions—taught this doctrine. Whereas Groningers pleaded for almost absolute freedom for preachers to preach what was in their heart, Doedes pleaded for an absolute mandate for preachers to preach only what the church wanted to hear preached.

In his critique, Doedes denied the validity of Scholten's material principle but upheld the formal principle, which he saw as *sola Scriptura*. It effectively meant that content had been removed from the concept of faith. Accordingly, the vague description used by Doedes of the doctrine of Scripture inevitably raises the question whether Doedes' regard for Scripture was the same as that found in Reformed confessions.

In relation to Scripture, it is noteworthy how Doedes makes revelation depend upon hermeneutics. On this point, Doedes stands methodologically shoulder-to-shoulder with Scholten. What Scholten does with logic, Doedes does with hermeneutics. For both scholars, epistemology plays an important role in what ought to be found in a confession. The difference is that Scholten's epistemology influences his view of confessions via the field of dogmatics, whereas Doedes' epistemology enters the picture via hermeneutics. This again illustrates that stances on confessions may actually be determined by non-theological factors.²⁷⁰

In 1853, Doedes responded to the provisional adoption of FS-1852 with a twenty-page tract. When FS-1852 was finally adopted in 1854, he published a brief article in the Ethical journal *Ernst*

²⁶⁸ Diest Lorgion, "Welke Waarde?"

²⁶⁹ Vree states that Van Oosterzee and Doedes continued in the line of Heringa (Vree, "Heringa", 192).

²⁷⁰ Doedes, "Stellingen".

en Vrede in which he briefly reiterated his position on confessions and confessional subscription. He further pointed out that FS-1852 was ambiguous in its understanding of God's Word, forms of subscription, and what is meant by preaching "God's grace."²⁷¹

With respect to Doedes' position in general, there are three points worthy of special attention.

First of all, Doedes suggests that forms of subscription are not meant for ministers but for the church. This would mean that the form of subscription should not be regarded as a personal confession of faith of the minister. That this is precisely what Doedes intends is clear from his description of what he considers to be a proper form of subscription. It is no more than a promise to the church; in fact, it is no more than a contract.

Secondly, comparing FS-1852 with Doedes' own proposal, his desire should be noted to replace "accept and uprightly believe" with the word "hold." This would remove every subjective element leaving an objective, epistemological premise: agreement with the formal principle of *sola Scriptura*. In this way, Doedes actually removed the substance of the Reformed confessions from the form of subscription. As long as one can claim to be arguing a particular doctrine from Scripture alone, no matter what that doctrine it is, one would be, by Doedes' definition, within the bounds of the confession.

Thirdly, Doedes seems to have realized that his principles would open the doors to just about anyone. To obviate this, he inserted a list of doctrines to which preachers ought to be bound. The insertion of such a list into the form of subscription would make it a confession itself. Thus, in practice, Doedes bypassed the confessions of the church and composed his own.

In short, Doedes' position on confessional subscription is not to be confused with that of the Juridical Calvinists. Because Doedes, like Heringa twenty-five years earlier, held to more or less orthodox doctrinal positions, he was thought to be conservative by both liberals and conservatives alike. However, this was a veneer covering a rationalism that considered reason and empirical observation rather than the books of Scripture its source for knowledge.

2.7.2.9 DOCTRINAL DISCIPLINE PROVES NON-EXISTENT: 1854²⁷²

1854 has gone down in the history of the NHK as the year of turbulence surrounding the calling of two ministers to two of the most prominent cities in the Netherlands: its capital Amsterdam and its seat of government, The Hague. In both cities, sizeable and influential groups of conservatives protested and followed the ecclesiastical appeals procedure to prevent the installations of these two ministers; it was in these two cities that the Réveil was strongest. The matter gained national attention and reached the synod by various paths. Since there was national involvement and the objections against the ministers were clearly doctrinal, the course of events in these matters is now reviewed. This review will also give insight into the spirit in which decisions were taken and executed, and explain why various groups in the NHK eventually lost all faith in synods.

On October 4, 1853, the general church council of the church of Amsterdam decided to call Rev. Dr. L. S. P. Meyboom, then minister in Groningen. Meyboom was an active Groninger. When Hofstede de Groot had once preached in The Hague and as a consequence been seriously attacked by Rev. J. I. Doedes of Rotterdam, it was Meyboom who took it upon himself to defend Hofstede's honour. As a result, Doedes and Meyboom polemicized the infallibility of Scripture, the divinity of Christ, and vicarious satisfaction, all points of doctrine on which Meyboom held unorthodox positions. Some five hundred church members in Amsterdam submitted a total of twenty-seven protests against this call. Even though Meyboom had already accepted the call, the

²⁷¹ Doedes, *Nieuwe Formulier* and Doedes, "Nieuwe Ondertekeningsformulier". Doedes himself lists eight truths to which he considered preachers ought to be bound.

²⁷² For a general description see Rullmann, *Kerkherstel*, 74-99, 131-164; Rasker, *De NHK vanaf 1795*, 162-164. For a more detailed account see Volger, *Vrijheid*, 7-87.

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church council was obliged by the regulations to submit these protests to the classical board. An advisory committee reported to CB Amsterdam that while some of Meyboom's doctrinal convictions contradicted those expressed in the confessions of the *Hervormde Kerk*, the doctrines in question were not those necessary for evangelical blessing and thus not at odds with the "formal foundational principle" of the confession. The protests were therefore dismissed and the call was approved. Subsequent appeals to the provincial board and the ASC were to no avail. It seemed there was no way to prevent Meyboom from becoming minister in Amsterdam.²⁷³

The congregation of The Hague had a very similar experience. Among its members were very influential conservatives, including the Seven Gentlemen of The Hague and Rev. D. Molenaar. Despite their presence, the church council was predominantly liberal during the early 1850s. When a ministerial vacancy arose, voices were raised requesting the church council call a conservative. Instead, on February 17, 1854, a call was extended to the 25 year-old Rev. Dr. J. C. Zaalberg of Deventer. Three ministers and ten other office bearers had their objections recorded in the minutes. Zaalberg was known to have Groninger inclinations, and willing to go even further than they. There were four protests against his call from within the congregation and these were duly submitted to CB The Hague. The classical board, however, judged that Zaalberg's teaching and lifestyle were within the boundaries outlined by the AR and Particular Regulations, and approved the call. Subsequent appeals to the provincial board and the ASC were to no avail. There seemed no way to prevent Zaalberg becoming minister in The Hague.²⁷⁴

Thus in 1854, nineteen submissions on the matter reached synod's table, some from Amsterdam and others from elsewhere in the country. One of these submissions was from CB Harderwijk. It questioned whether CB Amsterdam and PB Noord Holland were upholding AR art. 11, and called upon the synod once and for all to uphold the doctrine of the church.²⁷⁵

It was now up to the synod to respond. Synod's advisory committee reported that several of the submissions were technically inadmissible. Nevertheless, it advised the synod to take all submissions into consideration. It considered appeals to synod to testify of faith in the synod. The submission of CB Harderwijk was considered schismatic and improper since it encouraged synod to do something regulations did not allow it to do.

The report then addressed the matter of doctrinal maintenance. Synod was created in 1816 to govern the church, not to decide in doctrinal matters. Synod had maintained doctrine

not in the way, as some believe, it should have been done. Not by binding to the letter of the existing Forms of Unity; nor by revising the existing confessions or by attempting to write new ones; an undertaking which at that moment was no more desired than it would be discovered to be executable today; but it did this primarily, with much support from the church, by constantly reminding the congregation of the main contents of these confessions via the questions asked at the Lord's Supper celebration and seeking their response; by binding future ministers of the Gospel in the Church to a faithful preaching of its doctrine in agreement with God's Word; by, as much as it could, ensuring a free proclamation of the Gospel, not according to the letter, but according to the content and the spirit of the *Hervormde* confession, and by ensuring and preserving a regulated religious education in this same spirit.

Synod 1841, the report continued, had issued a clear explanation, and this had been confirmed in 1842. Moreover in 1842, the provincial boards were called upon to ensure that only those candidates are admitted to the ministry who

²⁷³ Volger notes that present at the meeting which called Meyboom were 22 ministers, 27 elders and 42 deacons, a total of 91 persons. The decision to call Meyboom was taken 46-45 (Volger, *Vrijheid*, 7). For a survey of Meyboom's doctrinal convictions see Volger, *Vrijheid*, 9-24. Volger provides a complete list.

²⁷⁴ Zaalberg indeed became a modernist later on. See Posthumus Meyjes, *'s-Gravenhage*, 153.

²⁷⁵ The earnestness with which this appeal was made is evidenced by the fact that not just the chairman and the clerk but all the members of the classical board signed the submission.

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are convinced of the doctrine, appearing in the Symbolical books of the Hervormde Kerk, as these in their nature and spirit constitute the essence and main substance of the confession of the *Hervormde Kerk*.

With this requirement, synods had given a measure of freedom, the report continued. This freedom is proper, though it had been abused in the past. However, no church is perfect. Faith is to be based, not on *authority* (that is Roman Catholic) but on *conviction*. The church will reach perfection, not by means of human doctrinal hypotheses, but by fresh, spirited and powerful preaching. The report bemoaned the fact that some petitioners had threatened disobedience if they did not get their way. It concluded that the true foundation of the church is not the confession but God's Word.

In view of these remarks, the advisory committee advised the synod as follows:

1. To acknowledge receipt of all submissions, even the improper ones.
2. To approve the faith displayed in the synod.
3. To admonish CB Harderwijk to maintain peace and order
4. To admonish all the disquieted members to peace and faith

The synod unanimously expressed agreement with this report. During the discussions, Rev. P. A. C. Hugenholtz moved that Synod (1) denounce the accusations made by CB Harderwijk against persons and boards, and (2) declare its intention to abide by the decisions of 1841 and 1842 and assert that the synod has done its utmost to maintain doctrine. The synod unanimously decided to issue a pastoral letter to the congregations on this issue, taking this motion into account.

In this letter, the synod noted that it had received requests to rescind the decisions of CB Amsterdam and PB Noord Holland, to restrict the freedom of doctrine in the *Hervormde Kerk* and thus to maintain the doctrine of the *Hervormde Kerk* more powerfully than had occurred thus far. The synod bemoaned the “destructive tenor” of most of these submissions and pointed out that the ASC, not a synod, is the proper court of appeal.²⁷⁶ The synod regretted that some persons made misuse of freedom of doctrine. However, it believed further restriction would not create peace but unrest. It further declared the accusations made to be incorrect: events of 1841-1842 were adduced to prove that the synod had taken seriously its task to maintain doctrine. The synod reminded the congregations

Wherever the one necessary item—unity of faith in Jesus Christ and mutual love—is found, perfect agreement in all the concepts of faith are certainly not necessary for true Christian life and the essential salvation of the Church.

Hence the synod admonished all who were disquieted not to expect the salvation of the church from human measures.²⁷⁷

When the synod's decision became known, the conservative J. A. Wormser wrote an appeal addressed directly to the throne of Christ; many signed it. Da Costa believed this appeal worthy of confessional status itself. However, the church council of Amsterdam dismissed this protest, and had all signatories who held office in the church removed from office.²⁷⁸

On the same day, October 29, 1854, Meyboom was installed in Amsterdam and Zaalberg in The Hague. On the following Wednesday, November 1, both ministers preached their inaugural sermons and both chose as their text 1 Cor. 2:2: “For I am determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”

Doctrinal liberty had been victorious and the scene had been set for decades of strife.

²⁷⁶ This is a remarkable assertion. For decisions made by the ASC were confirmed by Synod (e.g. on Meyboom: *Handelingen...NHK...* 1854:35) and in 1853 Synod even decided that the ASC could not consider appeals against church board decisions while Synod was in session or recess (*Handelingen...NHK...* 1853:21-22).

²⁷⁷ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1854:99-110 (report), 124-125 (discussion), 134-136 (letter). The advisory committee consisted of P. C. Molhuijsen, W. Muurling, J. M. de Kempnaer, G. J. F. Cramer von Baumgarten, and P. J. J. Mounier.

²⁷⁸ On this appeal see Volger, *Vrijheid*, 41, footnote 171.

2.7.2.10 THE CONSERVATIVE CAMP SPLINTERS²⁷⁹

During the 1840s, two semi-official associations had been formed within the conservative camp. The first was the association known as the *Christelijke Vrienden*, consisting of ministers and non-ministers; the second was the group of ministers generally referred to as “De Klomp.” Members of the *Christelijke Vrienden* were roughly equally divided between advocates of juridical and medical reform, whereas members of “De Klomp” tended to be advocates of medical reform. Groen van Prinsterer felt the need to unify the conservative camp in view of the common enemy. At his initiative, a meeting was held on August 18, 1848 in the Odeon Amsterdam in which an attempt was made to tighten the ranks (2.7.2.3). However, this meeting had the opposite effect: it resulted in the crystallization of positions that led to internal conflicts.

In 1851, the ministerial association “De Klomp” folded up due to insuperable differences of opinion within its ranks, including the method of church reform. The ministers were basically divided into the two camps: juridical (with Rev. G. Barger at one extreme) and medical (with Rev. N. Beets at the other extreme). However, with the dissolution, conservative ministers continued to feel the need for a conservative ministerial discussion-forum. In their opinion, the *Christelijke Vrienden* was insufficiently ecclesiastical in both its membership and operation, and tended to be too activist.²⁸⁰

Hence, on January 28, 1852, a new association was formed by former members of “De Klomp.” Rev. N. Beets was appointed its chairman. From among the founding members the following are worthy of note: G. Barger, J. I. Doedes, O. G. Heldring, J. J. van Oosterzee, and J. J. van Toorenenbergen. It is clear from this list that this association was not a homogeneous group, with Barger and Beets again as representatives of the juridical and medical poles respectively. However, the new association was not a revived “De Klomp.” The association was a brotherhood with strict membership criteria – by invitation only – whereas meetings of “De Klomp” had been open to all ministers. From among its later members, D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, J. H. Gunning jr., P. H. Hugenholtz (sr.), and the brothers J. C. and J. G. Verhoeff are worth noting.²⁸¹

Later in 1852, at the insistence particularly of Chantepie de la Saussaye, the (as yet nameless) association decided to start publishing its own organ. *De Vereeniging: Christelijke Stemmen*, the organ of the *Christelijke Vrienden*, was considered too philanthropic, and the *Jaarboeken* of Doedes and Van Oosterzee too academic. Doedes and Chantepie de la Saussaye were appointed editors of the new journal, and Beets was to assist them in the first year. Upon Beets’ initiative, the journal was entitled *Ernst en Vrede* (*Sincerity and Peace*). The term *Ernst* indicated that the character of truth and reality is not rational but ethical; the term *Vrede* expressed the hope for peace in the church. The adjectival phrase “ethical-irenical” was placed as subtitle in the journal’s masthead.²⁸² In 1853, the association decided that its own name would also be *Ernst en Vrede*. It is from this name that the Ethical or Ethical-Irenical movement derived its popular name.

In early 1854, between the confirmation and proclamation of FS-1852, *Ernst en Vrede* decided to lodge a protest to synod against FS-1852. Was *Ernst en Vrede* becoming more juridical? It would seem not. For in late 1854, *Ernst en Vrede* members Heldring and Chantepie de la Saussaye presented theses on the church to a meeting of the *Christelijke Vrienden*. An unplanned speech by the juridical and Darbyist Rev. J. de Liefde, minister of a conservative independent evangelical congregation, muddied the waters. It became evident that the chasm between the juridical and

²⁷⁹ Honders, *Doen en Laten*; Kluit, *Réveil*, 462-464. Many of the details in this subsection have been taken directly from Honders’ study.

²⁸⁰ The *Christelijke Vrienden* also had persons not belonging to the NHK as members and much of its work could be typified as para-church.

²⁸¹ On the placement of *Ernst en Vrede* within the context of other ministerial associations, see Vree, “Kraaienplaag”, 126-127.

²⁸² Brouwer points to Chantepie de la Saussaye as the “soul” of this journal (Brouwer, *Chantepie de la Saussaye*, 93).

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medical groups was widening, and Kluit speaks of this meeting as marking the parting of the two camps. This meeting proved the deathblow to the *Christelijke Vrienden*. Only its journal, with the philanthropic Rev. O. G. Heldring at the helm, would continue to voice its ideas. For the next ten years, the juridical camp fell silent.²⁸³

In November of that same year, 1854, *Ernst en Vrede* adopted the following mission statement:

We are here together as teachers, not only as those called to the proclamation of the Gospel in general, not only as leaders of several congregations; but as leaders in the NHK, owning the confession of faith, which constitutes the unity of that Church, and without official character, as brothers united to discuss in the first place those things which congregations and teachers are to do in the distress of the church, for the benefit of the NHK.

The extent of the breach between the two conservative groups can be seen in correspondence, partly extant, from the same period. One *Ernst en Vrede* member wrote to Beets and Chantepie de la Saussaye that co-operation with the juridical confessionals was essential for any undertaking to succeed. Beets rejected the idea out of hand, and Chantepie de la Saussaye responded, “If we are divided internally [in our ideas, RCJ] is it not proper that we are divided externally [in association and action, RCJ]?”²⁸⁴

During 1855, *Ernst en Vrede* expressed its concern about developments in the NHK. With the separation of church and state, it was argued, synod’s jurisdictional competence had been increased. The introduction of FS-1852 was, according to Gunning jr., tantamount to legalizing doctrinal freedom. Chantepie de la Saussaye bemoaned that synods failed to realize that between conservatism and liberalism was a third way.

In 1856, it became clear to the members how hopelessly divided they were, and totally incapable—some even entirely unwilling—to undertake action. In 1858, the members openly spoke of two currents within the association. Chantepie de la Saussaye described them as “the more individualistic and the more conservative.” Beets, not in attendance at the spring meeting of 1858, had submitted a letter informing *Ernst en Vrede* that his membership would cease. Chantepie de la Saussaye also offered to resign as member. During this period of soul-searching, Barger argued that the division had its origin in the varying ecclesiologies represented within the association. Whatever its precise background, the division proved insurmountable. In 1859, Beets and several other members met formally to cease *Ernst en Vrede*. A year earlier, Chantepie de la Saussaye, sole editor of the journal, had been obliged to cease its publication, not only because the number of subscribers had dropped drastically but also because the association had decided that the journal no longer reflected their general views.

Thus, like “De Klomp,” *Ernst en Vrede* had served not to unite but to antagonize ministers in their attempts to reform the NHK. On the other hand, *Ernst en Vrede* did fulfil its mission. It was within the space of its meetings and the pages of its journal that the principles of Ethicalism were developed. These would outlive the association by many decades.

In conclusion, the 1850s were a turbulent time for the conservative camp. An attempt in 1848 to unite the conservatives in their effort to reform the NHK confirmed the existence of a common desire to see the NHK reformed, but also made clear that the conservatives were divided over the means to this end. In 1851, the ministerial association “De Klomp” ceased meeting on account of internal differences. The brotherhood that became known as *Ernst en Vrede* suffered a similar fate only seven years after its inception. Even the *Christelijke Vrienden*, though broadminded and less theological, was not immune to the internal divisions, and folded up in 1854.

The underlying reasons for disunity within the conservative camp are complex. Theological insights played an important role, but political insights no less, which Kuiper has more than clearly

²⁸³ Kluit, *Réveil*, 473-481.

²⁸⁴ Honders, *Doen en Laten*, 40.

proven in his momentous study.²⁸⁵ However, personal characteristics—for example, the personal dislike Beets seems to have had for Groen, the complicated writing style of Chantepie de la Saussaye, and the uncertain allegiance of Heldring—played crucial roles as well. What Honders writes of *Ernst en Vrede* might be said of the whole conservative camp: they were brothers who felt united in their love for the church and in their vision for the holy catholic church, in whose existence they believed.²⁸⁶ However, as, in their opinion, the church underwent increasing deformation, the need to act became more pressing, and matters of principle and pragmatic differences superseded unifying desires.

2.7.2.11 ETHICALISM: D. CHANTEPIE DE LA SAUSSAYE

During the course of the 1850s, the Ethical Movement began to form within the conservative camp distinct from the Juridical Calvinist group. This subsection considers two publications from the father of Ethicalism, Rev. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, who was minister of the Walloon church in Leiden during the 1850s. The first publication, dated 1853, is a two-part article published in *Ernst en Vrede* on authority and liberty. The second, dated 1859, is a brochure which might well qualify as the funeral oration for the association *Ernst en Vrede*.²⁸⁷

Ethicalism's positions on confessional subscription are primarily determined by ecclesiological premises. Chantepie de la Saussaye distinguished between the "congregation" and the "church": the "congregation" as "the sum total of true believers", and the "church" as the gathering of "seekers and believers," made up of the "world and congregation". Confessional subscription was for him an element that belonged to the church (association), not the congregation. Chantepie de la Saussaye felt that confessional subscription was inappropriate since it treated the church as if it were the congregation, and would oust the world from the church. Chantepie de la Saussaye deemed the presence of the world in the church a necessity for the perfection of the congregation.

On the one hand, Chantepie de la Saussaye provided the medical approach to church reform with a theological framework. In relation to confessional subscription, Chantepie de la Saussaye believed that confessions ought to be fresh if they are to function. On the other hand, Chantepie de la Saussaye differed markedly from Da Costa. Whereas Da Costa argued that confessions should be rewritten and the church literally bound to them, Chantepie de la Saussaye argued that confessions would expel the world from the church, thus removing the sparring partner of the congregation, thereby obstructing the way to perfection.

The second publication evidences that Chantepie de la Saussaye operated on an entirely different plane from other groups within the NHK. In fact, when it comes to the issue of church reform and the attitude to the church, his closest allies were probably the Groningers. Like them, the Ethical Chantepie de la Saussaye was averse to all manner of intellectualism. Although Chantepie de la Saussaye was not as radical as the Groningers, especially in his dogmatic convictions, he shared with them an emphasis on life or experience as the essence of faith. This combined with his ecclesiology and his view of the work of the Spirit so as to create a position on confessional subscription that even his medically-minded colleagues in *Ernst en Vrede* failed to appreciate (assuming they understood it).

It is very difficult to pinpoint precisely the background to Ethical theology as first articulated by Chantepie de la Saussaye.²⁸⁸ It is clear that Hegelianism features very strongly in this theology: his

²⁸⁵ Kuiper, *Voormannen*, 84-110.

²⁸⁶ Honders, *Doen en Laten*, 149. For the personal characteristics and their role see also Honders.

²⁸⁷ I will not be reviewing Chantepie de la Saussaye's criticism of Scholten's *De Leer*. Although a monumental work and considered to be the best response to this Modernist exposition on doctrine, it contains no material related to confessional subscription which is not found in the publications I do draw on.

²⁸⁸ Ethicalism is a body of ideas that is not easily understood, especially in its first instance as developed by Chantepie de la Saussaye. O. Noordmans, a third generation Ethical, considered Chantepie de la Saussaye's theology as problematic as the Egyptian Sphinx (Noordmans, *Geestelijke Perspectieven*, 136). Haitjema concluded that

references to “struggles between imperfect congregation and world” remind one of the Hegelian interaction of thesis and antithesis resulting in synthesis, and his constant references to the “perfected future church” betray idealism.

His position is also somewhat ambiguous. In line with Reformed orthodoxy, Chantepie de la Saussaye pointed out that the Spirit alone can reform the church. However, he failed to describe how this outpouring of the Spirit would take shape. He neglected the Juridical Calvinist argument that the Spirit employs means, arguably including confessions and confessional subscription. Chantepie de la Saussaye’s argument in favour of inactivity can very quickly lead to an accusation of neglect of the type heard from Groen during the 1840s. Instead of healing the NHK, Chantepie de la Saussaye could be accused of letting the patient die.

Finally, there was the warning not to objectify confessing or petrify dogma. Da Costa’s line that a confession should be fresh and that faith should be alive continued to be emphasized. In this context, Chantepie de la Saussaye used the image of heated iron. Cold doctrine can be very hard indeed.²⁸⁹

In conclusion, with respect to confessional subscription Chantepie de la Saussaye argued that it had played a valuable role in the past but that it could no longer be used in the present. To him, confessional subscription had led to the petrification of dogma and taken the spirit out of faith. It was time for new and daring approaches to the unification of God’s people, he opined. As such, confessional subscription became something of a non issue for the Ethical Movement.

2.7.2.12 THE SECEDERS

Reflection on confessional subscription was not just a matter for the NHK. In course of time, the Seceders were also forced to reflect on the matter. This subsection reviews their history as it relates to confessional subscription.

It should be noted that Rev. A. C. Van Raalte and Rev. H. P. Scholte crossed the Atlantic for Michigan (1846) and Iowa (1847) respectively. In particular, the departure of Scholte meant that a cause of disturbance within the CAGK was no longer present.

2.7.2.12.1 Reunion²⁹⁰

During the course of the 1840s, serious disagreements arose between the groups of churches within the CAGK, resulting in dissent especially between the Provincial Synods of Overijssel and Gelderland and other synods. One of the concerns related to what was implied by subscription to the confessions and the church order. It should be noted that not all the churches in Overijssel and Gelderland sided with the majority position taken by the provincial synods there. Likewise, not all the churches outside Overijssel and Gelderland agreed with the position taken by their provincial synods.

During the late 1840s and early 1850s, various attempts were made at solving the differences and reuniting the churches. Of special note was the attempt in 1851. The delegates from Overijssel and Gelderland were asked to re-affirm their agreement with the Three Forms of Unity and with CO-1619 as preconditions for being recognized as lawful members of synod. The delegates were reluctant to do so. They were afraid that this affirmation would be interpreted as an admission that they had formerly departed from Reformed doctrine and order, something they adamantly refuted. They formulated a statement saying as much. As the synod would not accept this conditional affirmation, the breach continued.²⁹¹

Chantepie de la Saussaye was ambiguous because he drew from two springs (Haitjema, *Richtingen*, 56). One of Chantepie de la Saussaye’s biographers considers it easier to describe what Chantepie de la Saussaye did not teach than what he did teach (Brouwer, *Chantepie de la Saussaye*, 72). See further Rasker, *De NHK vanaf 1795*, 125-138.

²⁸⁹ Chantepie de la Saussaye, "Gezag en Vrijheid"; Chantepie de la Saussaye, *Nood*.

²⁹⁰ Te Velde, *Brummelkamp*, 193-225.

²⁹¹ CAGK, *Handelingen en verslagen*, 1851, section 3.

Historical Part

In 1854 the breach had been healed at the provincial level. Thus an attempt was made to settle the issues at the national level in that same year. Again there was discussion as to what the affirmation implied. In the end, however, the delegates from Overijssel and Gelderland signed a declaration, which opened with the following line:

In order that the union, made in Zwolle and Arnhem, can be accomplished, the undersigned declare for the quiescence of the brothers, in good conscience, by means of this [document], that they are entirely united with God's Word, the Forms of Unity, and the adopted Church Order of Dort of 1619 and whatever is associated therewith.²⁹²

This subscription formula is of interest because it places Scripture, the Forms of Unity and the Church Order of Dort on one line. This is perfectly understandable in the context of the breach: doubt had been cast not only on faithfulness to the Church Order but also on points of doctrine.

2.7.2.12.2 Confessing at Synod²⁹³

Once the breach had been healed, synod decided that every synod ought explicitly to express its Reformed character in doctrine, order and worship. After it had been made clear that such an expression could not be used as an occasion to examine the reformed character of a member of synod, but that the expression was simply to indicate to the outside world what the church stood for, a statement was drawn up and signed on behalf of synod by its chairman and clerk.²⁹⁴

In 1857, the practice instituted in 1854 was repeated. In 1860, there seems to have been a slight change in practice on this point. The acts simply state that the chairman read the statement and asked the members of the synod whether they were in agreement with the statement. It is not explicitly recorded that the chairman and the clerk signed the declaration on behalf of synod. The practice continued in this line in 1863, 1866, and 1869. The minute on this point in 1869 is very brief indeed, suggesting that the practice had almost become a formality. It is interesting to note the records of this practice in the acts of 1872 and 1875:

1872: The President asks, according to the rule of the Church (see Synod 1854) the agreement of all members with the Reformed Confession. This is unequivocally attested to by all.

1875: The President asks the members of the Synod to indicate their agreement with the Confessional Documents of the Reformed Church by rising from their seats, with which all comply.

The practice is not found in the acts of the *Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Kerken* nor at the convention of the CGKN and NDGK in 1892, but was practised by the GKN in 1893.²⁹⁵

It seems that the original intent of this practice has been lost sight of, to the extent that delegates to several synods in the twentieth century have not been seated because of presumed disagreement with Reformed doctrine, order and worship.²⁹⁶

²⁹² CAGK, *Handelingen en verslagen*, 1854, session 4, art. 3.

²⁹³ Although Van Genderen does refer to the practice (even including a photo), his article contains no reference to what is reviewed here (Van Genderen, "Kerk en confessie").

²⁹⁴ CAGK, *Handelingen en verslagen*, 1854, session 6, art. 11 and session 9, art. 6.

²⁹⁵ CAGK, *Handelingen en verslagen*, 1857, art. 17; 1860, art. 11; 1863, art. 7; 1866, art. 7; 1869, art. 6. *Acta...CGKN...* 1872: art. 5; 1875: art. 5. *Acta...GKN...* 1893: art. 6.

²⁹⁶ I think here of the Schoep case during the 1960s in the GKN(v) (see 2.14.2.1.7) or the Van Hulst case during the 1990s in the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, a "daughter" church of the GKN(v). The point I make here has not been noted in the official report submitted to GS 1967 of the GKN(v) (*Acta...GKN(v)...* 1966-67, bijlage 15). It is interesting to note that in the Berkhof case, the accused was seated during the synod in the 1930s in the CGKN which tried him and found him guilty (see 2.10.2.5).

2.7.2.12.3 Subscription for Professors²⁹⁷

Disagreement had arisen in 1855 and thereafter as to what precisely ought to be taught at the seminary of the Seceders in Kampen. This became a subject for discussion at Synod 1857. After a lengthy discussion, the synod decided to draw up a declaration in which it outlined points of doctrine it felt should be taught. These were: inherent and external knowledge of God, the generation of the Son of God, the covenant of works, the various forms of faith (salvific, historic, temporal, and miracle), the effective call of the gospel for all hearers, baptism not implying election, church membership, and the necessity to combat heresy. The synod prescribed the works of J. à Mark, D. le Roy and A. Francken as handbooks for dogmatics. This declaration was to be signed by the lecturers at the seminary. Four members of synod disagreed with the propriety of this decision and had their protest recorded in the acts.²⁹⁸

How should one see this event in view of confessional subscription? On the one hand, Synod 1857 clearly took a doctrinal position on certain issues. Although there are no references to Scripture or the Forms of Unity in this declaration, reference is made to the Walcheren Articles. As such, the document should not be considered a confessional statement nor a doctrinal declaration. Nevertheless, the fact that lecturers at the seminary were enjoined to subscribe the declaration does suggest a form of binding to doctrine in some form.

A number of matters are noteworthy. First of all, subscription was considered by the Seceders a legitimate means in a moment of uncertainty to gain clarity concerning a person's stance. Secondly, the Seceders considered it legitimate to distinguish in the matter of subscription between lecturers and ministers. This second matter implies that subscription as a phenomenon did not function as something on its own but was specifically related to the activity of the subscriber. A third point is that the Seceders also considered it legitimate to bind to more than just the confessional statements of the CAGK. This seems to suggest that the greater one's responsibility in the church, the stricter one's binding to convictions of the church. However, the question arises whether the extra-confessional doctrinal

GS CAGK 1854, session 9 art. 6

Public Declaration

Of all the marks by which the true Church identifies itself from human associations, the confession of the truth may be noted first.

Concerning this the Saviour said: "If you remain in My word, you are truly my disciples," Joh. 8:31. And again: "whoever then, confesses me before men, him shall I also confess before My Father, who is in heaven," Matth. 10:32.

In obedience to the Lord, and to the instruction of all, the Assembly of Overseers, delegated from the Christian Seceded Reformed Congregations in the various Provinces of The Netherlands, considers it proper, that publicly be declared, which is the confession of the referred to Congregations.

All these Congregations acknowledge the Confession of faith of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands, the Catechism and the Canons of the Synod of Dordrecht, held in the years 1618 and 1619, as the complete expression of their faith.

In agreement with these Congregations, and as their general Church assembly, we readily testify, that we heartily feel and believe, that all the articles and points of doctrine, contained in the mentioned three Forms of Unity, agree with God's Word in everything; wherefore we reject every teaching against it; desire to bring all our actions in agreement with it, as is clear from our adoption of the Church Order of Dordrecht of 1618 and 1619; and wish to accept into our ecclesiastical community all those who agree with this confession.

May the King of the Church work and increase this faith in the hearts of many, and may those, who with us have received a dear faith, display the grace shown to them in the practice of communion, to the glory of Him, who prayed that all those who are His might be one.

Signed: chairman, clerk.

²⁹⁷ For the context see Te Velde, *Brummelkamp*, 260-293.

²⁹⁸ CAGK, *Handelingen en verslagen*, 1857: art. 109 en 119; see also 1860: art. 36, 40, 44, 45, 48, 49, 51-53, 63-65, 69, 78, 86.

positions to which the professors were being bound can indeed be considered “the convictions of the church.”²⁹⁹

2.7.2.12.4 Conclusion

Within CAGK circles, the position of GS Dordrecht 1618-19 continued to be advocated. Subscription was considered a legitimate way to gain clarity in moments of uncertainty, as is clear from the healing of the internal breach in 1854 and the resolution of the disunity at the Theological School. Moreover, the Seceders lived out their faith and introduced the practice of a public synodical declaration on the faith of the church. The CAGK not only had a confession, it confessed its confession.

2.7.3 ANALYSIS

The following six positions are identified within Dutch Reformed circles with respect to confessional subscription: Idealist Modernist, Groninger, Apologist, Ethical, Juridical Calvinist, and Seceder. The Ethical Movement had to some degree absorbed the Medical Calvinist group, and the Traditionalist Calvinist position was not as much in the public spotlight as it had been formerly. In certain ways it is possible to differentiate within the Juridical Calvinist school of thought.³⁰⁰ However, to create separate sub-groups would create the impression that these sub-groups stood on par with the Groningers or the Ethicals. The following analysis considers the Juridical Calvinist group as one, pointing out differences where appropriate. To these six positions a seventh can be added, that of successive synods. This position, however, is of a different order, since it is more the compromise of the most influential schools of thought in any given year than a position in its own right.

One more comment needs to be made before analysing the various positions. Many of the “schools of thought” were actually the thoughts of just one or two individuals. The Modernist position was articulated by Scholten, the Apologist position by Doedes and Van Oosterzee, and the Ethical position by Chantepie de la Saussaye. This being the case, the influence of their ideas during this period was rather limited.

2.7.3.1 WHETHER AND HOW ONE OUGHT TO BE BOUND TO THE CONFSSIONAL DOCUMENTS

In the present analysis of the manner in which a person ought to be bound to the confessional documents, the theoretical position of a group of persons and the way their position proved to be in practice are distinguished.

In theory, by proclaiming FS-1852, the NHK synod advocated a non-substantive binding: one is bound to the spirit of the confession. The events of 1854 made clear that this approach took on an individual application: preachers could decide for themselves to what they were bound. Synod’s position was remarkably like that of the Groningers during the 1840s. This is easily explained: Pareau had been influential in formulating FS-1852, and Scholten’s dogmatics had only impacted so far in academic circles. It is interesting to note, though, that during the 1850s, Groningers preferred to see subscription abolished altogether. They considered subscription to be wrong; one should not be forced to declare one’s inner convictions. The most the church can require is that preachers promise to preach according to their convictions.

²⁹⁹ Te Velde concludes “5. It has been a blessing for the churches, that the synods did not ecclesiastically fix the dogmatic terms of the previous two centuries, but in the end almost always returned to the formulations of Scripture and the confession.” (Te Velde, *Brummelkamp*, 293). I note that also in 1860 the curators reported that the professors all strictly kept to the prescriptions of GS Leijden 1857 (CAGK, *Handelingen en verslagen*, 1860: art. 36). While the decision of 1857 was indeed not an “ecclesiastical fixing” of church doctrine in confessions, it does come very close.

³⁰⁰ For a detailed analysis see Nauta, *Verbindende kracht*, 47-64.

The liberal newcomer, Scholten, advocated what in theory boils down to binding to the essence or main substance of the confession: binding to the formal and material principles of reformed doctrine. In practice, it meant the most minimal of bindings: binding to just the one doctrine of God's grace in Jesus Christ, and the methodology of drawing on revelation.

The Ethical Chantepie de la Saussaye considered confessional subscription to be outdated. In the past it had done its work, but in view of the new level that the church had attained in history, confessional subscription no longer had a place in the structure of the church. In practice, it meant that Ethicals agreed with Groningers that confessional subscription should be abolished.

It is not entirely clear where the Apologist Doedes stood in theory with respect to binding to the confession. On the one hand, he pleaded for the reintroduction of some sort of subscription to the Three Forms of Unity; on the other hand, he provided a list of doctrines to which one should subscribe that was shorter than in the confessions. It is clear that in practice his position would entail binding to the main substance or essence of the confessions.

The same can be said of the Juridical Calvinist Groen van Prinsterer, although Groen was far more orthodox in his arguments than Doedes. Van der Kemp and the Seceders opposed Groen on the tension between his theory and what appeared in practice to be binding to less than the full substance of the confessions. Van der Kemp and the Seceder Van Velzen differed in that Van der Kemp considered a new confession necessary while Van Velzen was content with the Three Forms of Unity.

When all is said and done, following positions defended during the late 1840s and 1850s can be discerned: no binding (Groninger, Ethical), attitudinal and individual binding (Synod), essential binding (Modernist and Apologist), and substantive binding (Van der Kemp and the Seceders). Though the phantom of literal binding continued to haunt the debate, there were no clear advocates of this position. There is some uncertainty regarding the position of Groen van Prinsterer. His was perceived by many to be essential binding but may require a different analysis.

2.7.3.2 OBJECTIVE / SUBJECTIVE SIDES OF CONFESSIONS

In the analysis of the positions during the early 1840s, tension was discerned between the objective and subjective sides of the confessions, that is, the extent to which the character of the confession is determined by the object of confessing (divine revelation) or the subject of confessing (the believer; the church). The issue does not really come to the fore in many publications from the late 1840s or the 1850s. This could be because the Medical Calvinist camp—which, over against the Juridical Calvinist camp, emphasized the subjective side of confessions—was subsumed into the Ethical camp, and the Ethicals chose to neglect the existing confessional writings. It is interesting to note that both Groen and Van der Kemp emphasized that a confession must be relevant and up-to-date. It is clear that Juridical Calvinists were not formalist and traditionalist but sought to do justice to both the subjective and objective sides of the confessions.

The Juridical Calvinist position stands in stark contrast with the Apologist Doedes who objectified a confessional writing to a document that outlines what one must teach as a preacher in the NHK. Like Juridical Calvinists, Doedes considered the confessions to be a standard for preaching. However, to his way of thinking, the confession is simply a curriculum that a preacher need not personally subscribe in all details, though in these years Doedes did for the most part subscribe. The difference is that Doedes did not consider it absolutely necessary for the preacher to be convinced of what he taught, but the Juridical Calvinists did. It is on this point that Juridical Calvinists and Apologists part ways in the field of confessional subscription. One might say that substantively the two were one, but formally they held very different positions.

2.7.3.3 THE REVISION OF CONFESSIONS AND THE BODY THAT CONTROLS THIS

Related to the foregoing is the matter of confessional revision. The Juridical Calvinists Groen van Prinsterer, Van der Kemp and Van Toorenenbergen, the Modernist Scholten, and the Ethical

Chantepie de la Saussaye advocated revision of the confessions. Van Toorenenbergen and Chantepie de la Saussaye even went so far as to suggest that Dort's intention had been to have the confessions revised regularly. During the 1850s, this issue hardly played a role but during the following decades this theme would come to dominate the discussion between particular groups.

Related to the issue of confessional revision is the question of who has the authority to formulate and maintain confessions. The Modernist Scholten argued this was a task for science; the Groninger Pareau countered this strongly with the claim that confessing is an issue of preaching. The Apologist Doedes defended what appears to be a compromise: science (hermeneutics) and the church each have a role to play. This issue, where the deciding factor is clearly one's view on intellectualism, formed a dividing line within the liberal camp.

This was not an issue for the conservative camp. To the extent that the parties accepted the legitimacy of confessions, they all argued that determining a confession is the prerogative of the church.

2.7.3.4 UNDERLYING PREMISES

During this period, ecclesiology begins to play an increasingly determinative role within the more orthodox circles. Groen argued, as he had always done, that confessions are ecclesiastical documents. Individual members were not to meddle with what has been commonly agreed upon. They were to conform their faith convictions to those of the ecclesiastical confessions. Doedes made the distinction between the church and its members to an even greater degree. He argued that members were free to believe as they saw fit. Their church membership meant that they could not always openly declare their convictions. One sees a whole different relationship within the Ethical scheme of things. Chantepie de la Saussaye distinguished between the congregation as God's chosen people and the church as the institution in which the world mixed with the congregation so that the congregation might grow through its struggle with the world. In this scheme there is no place for ecclesiastical (church) confessions: their existence would make any form of struggle impossible.

The earlier analyses noted the presence of what was termed the "natural line" of arguing alongside the "spiritual line." The natural line justifies confessional subscription with premises such as civil duty and contractarian notions (e.g. the right of association and disassociation). The spiritual line justifies the practice of subscription with premises drawn from divine revelation. In the analysis of positions during the 1830s, it was noted that the two were present in more or less equal measure in Calvinist and Seceder publications, but that during the early 1840s the natural line became less dominant, and the trend continued through the late 1840s and 1850s. By then, the natural line had all but disappeared in the Juridical Calvinist publications, and Van Velzen clearly preferred to concentrate on the spiritual line. However, the natural line had not disappeared from the debate, and since Scholten had a low view of Scripture, he used natural arguments drawn from Rationalism and Idealism³⁰¹ to underpin the propriety of confessional subscription.

With increasing doctrinal licentiousness in the NHK and a concomitant increasing influence of the more extreme liberal wing, philosophical trends came to be more and more influential in the debate on confessional subscription. Epistemological views seem to have predetermined positions on confessional subscription. Scholten's position, for example, is clearly influenced by Rationalism in its methodology and Idealism in its substance. Chantepie de la Saussaye betrays the influence of Hegelianism. His ecclesiology is an application of the idea that thesis plus antithesis leads to synthesis. Thus he considered confessional subscription undesirable because it obstructs the interaction between thesis (congregation) and antithesis (the world). Ethicalism differed from

³⁰¹ This is especially evident in Scholten's orthodox sounding assertion "No church without a confession." This motto was not based on Matt. 10:32 and similar texts, but on the fact that each church must stand for something (rationalism) and it belongs to the essence of a church to confess (idealism).

Modernism in its anti-intellectual stance. Doedes agreed with Scholten on the question of methodology and differed on the issue of contents. The Apologist applied Rationalist methods to Scripture. The Groningers were clearly Kantian in their epistemology. Diest Lorgion's distinction between reality (that which is *an Sich*) and concepts and doctrines is especially revealing. The Groninger position was that a confession as a "statement of what is true" is impossible since absolute knowledge of the truth is impossible. If confessions are considered mere "statements of conviction" then they are of no greater value than any scientific hypothesis, such that binding to them is out of the question. Within the Juridical Calvinist and Secessionist groups, it is difficult simply to state a particular influence. One cannot overlook, however, Groen's telling statement that "Gold is not gold because it is thus assayed". This implies that a confession is not to be considered the truth merely because someone has accepted it as such, thus indicating that the character of a confession is more than subjective.

2.7.3.5 REFORMING THE NHK

Although not directly related to this present study, the issue of church reform is briefly touched upon.

The Groningers considered further structural reform of the NHK unnecessary since things were fine as they were. This position is not surprising as it was the Groninger Pareau, with the cooperation of Hofstede de Groot and Muurling, who for a large part determined AR-1852 and the sub-regulations. Organizationally, the NHK was a Groninger church.

Chantepie de la Saussaye advocated inactivity, suggesting that the congregation should find its own way in the church.

In practice, this meant that Groningers and Ethicals championed the same cause of inactivity.

Van der Kemp advocated a juridical approach to church reform, provided the confessions were brought up-to-date. Groen was a little more vague on the issue. On the one hand, he pleaded for juridical reform, on the other he built in a buffer of tolerance.

Finally, there is the Secessionist position articulated by Van Velzen that the NHK is a false church and, in view of Belgic Confession art. 28, those who heartily accept the reformed confessions should leave it.

As in foregoing decades, the structure of the NHK and the differing problems varying groups had with it dominated the debate on confessional subscription.

2.7.3.6 CONCLUSION

In summary, the main factors in the discussion on confessional subscription during this period were whether and how one ought to be bound to confessional documents, with theory and practice not always quite matching; the tension between the objective and subjective sides of a confession; the authority to formulate and maintain a confession; underlying ecclesiology; underlying epistemology; and the question of reforming the NHK. For the sake of continuity with analyses for other periods, it was noted that the natural line of argument had all but disappeared from conservative publications but continued to be part of the debate via liberal writings, and that the issue of confessional revision had been tabled but had not yet proven to be a real point of debate.

2.7.4 CONCLUSION

The late 1840s and 1850s were a milestone in reflection on confessional subscription. With the publication of Scholten's *De Leer*, a new element had been introduced into the debate. The proclamation of FS-1852 and Synod's inactivity in 1854 confirmed that doctrinal liberty had gained a foothold in the NHK. The Odeon meeting and subsequent crystallization of various conservative viewpoints led to a division of powers and a parting of ways. Given the wide range of standpoints and the fact that all these parties associated via the one synod, the scene was set for a solid debate.

2.8 A Decade of Polemics (1860s)

During the 1860s, the NHK had become accustomed to the use of AR-1852. Most of the sub-regulations had been replaced. However, the final and probably most impacting sub-regulation—that which regulated the democratization of the congregations, granting church members direct input into the election of office bearers—did not come into force until 1867. Thus the 1860s can be properly characterized as the close of the interim period between AR-1816 and the full implementation of AR-1852. This characterization certainly applies to the field of confessional subscription. During the 1860s, successive synods continued past policy. However, conservative voices became more prominent and it is clear that the 1860s mark the beginning of a power struggle. During the 1860s, there was also a repositioning within the various theological schools of thought.

This chapter first briefly reviews the various theological schools of thought in the NHK during the 1860s (2.8.1). It then reviews the course of events and relevant publications, of which there are relatively many for this period (2.8.2). Finally, there is comparison and analysis of the various positions defended throughout these years (2.8.3), and some concluding remarks (2.8.4).

2.8.1 THEOLOGICAL SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

In this section a review is presented of those schools of thought that played a role in reflection on confessional subscription during the 1860s.

2.8.1.1 MODERNISM

In 1848, Scholten’s *De Leer* marked the inception of Modernism as a separate persuasion in the NHK. However, since modernism was very much dependent on underlying philosophical premises, it would be erroneous to assume that this school of thought was homogeneous. It has already been pointed out that besides Scholten’s **Idealist Modernism** there was the development of **Empirical Modernism** during the 1850s in the wake of Opzoomer’s switch from Idealism to Empiricism. Whereas Idealist Modernists sought confirmation of reality in the mind, Empiricist Modernists sought confirmation of reality in the observable and in feelings. It was Rev. A. Pierson, Walloon minister in Rotterdam, who applied Opzoomer’s new direction to theology. Though both schools of thought shared the rationalist method, they disagreed on the proof for the existence of the supernatural. Empirical Modernism, being more in accord with the general advances of the natural sciences, became more popular than Idealist Modernism. During the course of the 1860s, a third Modernist school developed. It came to be known as **Ethical Modernism**. Whereas Scholten and Opzoomer (and Pierson in his wake) had championed the view that “God” is the object of theology, the Mennonite Rev. S. Hoekstra Bzn. of Rotterdam argued that “religion” should be the object of theology. His ideas soon gained a foothold in the NHK. Ethical Modernism had a Kantian view of reality, but it differed from Kantianism in considering faith a postulate of man’s religious need rather than man’s moral capacities. Hoekstra so strongly argued a dualism between religion (which he considered to belong to the field of psychology) and the natural sciences that he concluded that statements of faith can never be considered to be statements reflecting reality. It is at this point that Idealist and Empirical Modernism and Ethical Modernism parted ways: the former considered knowledge of the supernatural to be objective, the latter subjective. Ethical Modernists also rejected the rationalist method, favouring a more sensual approach. These schools of thought may be compared and contrasted as follows:

School of thought	Methodology	Object of Theology	Knowledge of the supernatural is	Foundation for ‘knowledge’ of the supernatural
Idealist Modernism	Rationalist	God	Objective	The mind
Empiricist Modernism	Rationalist	God	Objective	Observation and feelings
Ethical Modernism	Sensual	Religion	Subjective	Feelings

2.8.1.1 Modernist Schools of Thought

Modernists battled with each other as vehemently as they did with other schools of thought. They were also poorly organized. It was not until 1866 that Modernists attempted to organize themselves, and not until 1870 that Modernists had formed a clearly distinguishable institutionalized group within the NHK. On the other hand, their influence among the church populace grew considerably when in 1857-58 the Modernist Rev. C. Busken Huet, Walloon minister in Haarlem, popularized David Strauss' *Life of Jesus Christ* via the publication of *Brieven over de Bijbel (Letters on the Bible)*.³⁰² Many church members no longer took affront when a minister argued that a particular miracle had not taken place, and higher criticism soon gained a firm foothold at the universities of Leiden, Utrecht, and Groningen.³⁰³

2.8.1.2 GRONINGERS OR EVANGELICISM

With the emergence of Modernism as a separate persuasion within the church, the Groningers were no longer the extreme liberals in the NHK. In fact, during the 1860s they came to be seen more as the establishment. There was much tension within the ranks of the Groninger persuasion. New generation Groningers were more radical in their ideas, especially due to the increasing influence of higher criticism, and were prepared to abandon even the most traditional reformed doctrines. During the 1860s, a deep rift formed within the Groninger camp, personalized in debates between Prof. P. Hofstede de Groot and Prof. W. Muurling. More liberal Groningers, including Meyboom, Zaalberg, Muurling, and Diest Lorgion, eventually crossed over to the Modernist camp, especially when Ethical Modernism made its debut. In reaction to this crossover to intellectualism, more conservative Groningers began to co-operate more closely with Ethicals. The Groningers—or Evangelicals as they came to be more popularly known during the 1860s—continued to be influential among the church populace and to dominate the ministerial associations during this period. They were also very prominent at the synods.³⁰⁴

2.8.1.3 THE APOLOGIST SCHOOL

In 1859 Rev. J. I. Doedes was appointed professor in Utrecht, and in 1866 his lifelong friend and colleague Rev. J. J. van Oosterzee joined him there. In general, their positions on church reform and confessional subscription during the 1860s were identical to those of the 1850s. However, their influence became greater, especially since they frequently served synods as professorial advisors.³⁰⁵

2.8.1.4 ETHICALISM

Although Rev. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye of Leiden initiated this new school of thought, he never brought it to a systematic whole, nor could he apply its principles in practice. It was Rev. J. H. Gunning jr., Rev. D. Molenaar's successor in The Hague, who set about this task. Unlike Chantepie de la Saussaye, however, Gunning actively sought reorganization of the NHK, albeit in line with Ethical principles.

Because Ethicals did not organize themselves as a school, the labour of Chantepie de la Saussaye and Gunning combined is generally considered to reflect the Ethical school during the 1860s.³⁰⁶ Probably on account of their irenic attitude, Ethical ideas were rather popular among church

³⁰² Busken Huet, *Brieven over den Bijbel*.

³⁰³ For literature see 2.7.1.2.

³⁰⁴ For literature see 2.5.1. Huizinga disputes the direct link between the Groningers and the Evangelicals. He also notes that the influence of the Groningers lasted the longest at the synods (Huizinga, "Groninger Richting", 162). However, Vree has argued that the link is direct (see Vree, "Nadagen van Groninger Richting en Reveil").

³⁰⁵ For literature see 2.7.1.3.

³⁰⁶ See Haitjema, *Richtingen*, 50-90 and Rasker, *De NHK vanaf 1795*, 125-152. An introduction to a collection of essays on Gunning describes Gunning as "the foremost leader of Ethicalism after La Saussaye" (Hetteema and Mietus, *Noblesse Oblige*, 9).

office bearers.³⁰⁷ It is worthy of note that Gunning co-operated with the more moderate Juridical Calvinists during the early 1860s but refused to co-operate with the more strict Juridical Calvinists.³⁰⁸

2.8.1.5 JURIDICAL CALVINISTS

Within the NHK, Juridical Calvinists continued to debate the precise limits of confessional subscription and the issue of church reform. During the 1860s, the Juridical Calvinist camp organized itself in two associations: the *Evangelisch-Confessioneele Predikantenvereeniging* (ECPV—Evangelic Confessional Association of Ministers) and the *Confessioneele Vereeniging* (CV—Confessional Association). These were developments not unlike those of the late 1840s and 1850s: the formation of two associations, the one purely ministerial, the other mixed, the former more medically minded than the latter even though the former gave birth to the latter. A difference from former organizations was that they had more staying power. These two parties are referred in this present study to as **Evangelic Confessional** and **Juridical Confessional**. The main point of difference was on the precise relationship between confessions, Scripture, and the church.³⁰⁹

2.8.1.6 SECEDERS

Thus far the Seceders have been considered as one group, though it has been noted that the Seceders did not form one association of churches (2.5.2.15). Thus far, only the stance taken by Rev. H. de Cock, the position held by Rev. S. van Velzen over against especially Groen van Prinsterer, and the measures relating to confessions taken in their midst, have been considered. In 1869 a merger took place between two groups with roots in the Secession. Since confessional subscription played a role in this merger, it is proper to tell a little more about the various groups of Seceders.

The largest group was that which more or less consolidated itself into an association of churches in 1840 (although internal strife continued up until 1854), which became known as the *Christelijk Afscheidene Gereformeerde Kerk* (Christian Seceded Reformed Church).

A second group sizeable group consisted of churches in the region around Kampen and Zwolle and in the provincial region Holland. Officially they were known as the *Gereformeerde Kerk in Nederland* (Reformed Church in The Netherlands), but they were generally referred to as the *Kruisgezinden* (Persuasion of the Cross) or *Kerken onder het Kruis* (Churches under the Cross).³¹⁰ These terms alluded to their refusal to seek civil recognition for their existence apart from the NHK, and their repression as a result. In general, the *Kruisgezinden* tended to be more hyper-Calvinist and experiential than the CAGK. They were also strongly influenced by personal allegiances.

In 1869, the majority of the *Kruisgezinden* united with the CAGK to form the new association of the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk in Nederland* (CGKN—Christian Reformed Church in The Netherlands).

³⁰⁷ This can be proven from a close reading of the acts and the extent of agreement expressed with suggestions from Chantepie de la Saussaye and Gunning, who both served synod as professorial advisors at some stage during their lives.

³⁰⁸ For literature see 2.7.1.4.

³⁰⁹ The ECPV eventually became part of the “Bond van Nederlandse Predikanten” (Union of Dutch Ministers).—Fiolet, *Onrust*, 122-142; Luteijn, *Honderd Jaar CV*, 62-63.

³¹⁰ For literature on the *Kruisgezinden* see 2.5.2.15. They are not to be confused with the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*, a bond formed in 1892. To avoid such confusion I will follow the Dutch custom of referring to this group by the name *Kruisgezinden*.

A third sizeable group consisted of churches primarily in the south-west of The Netherlands, united around the figure of Rev. L. G. C. Ledeboer. They were generally known as the *Ledeboerianen*³¹¹ and had a very strong inclination towards hyper-calvinism.

2.8.1.7 SUMMARY

In short, great diversity of theological currents flowed within the NHK, and sub-currents become evident within the main currents. Modernism existed in three forms: Idealist, Empirical, and Ethical. Within the Groninger or Evangelical School, the spectrum ranged from radical to conservative. Even within the Juridical Calvinist persuasion, two currents developed: the Evangelical Confessionals and the Juridical Confessionals. Within the camps of the Ethicals and Apologists there seemed to have been a measure of consistency. In contrast to the divergence within the NHK, there was a measure of rapprochement between the Seceders as the CAGK and the *Kruisgezinden* overcame their differences and united.

2.8.2 EVENTS AND PUBLICATIONS

With respect to the issue of confessional subscription, the 1860s form a decade of much, heavy polemics. Unlike previous decades, discussions were not so much initiated by actions of synods but were more concerned with internal debates between various currents and sub-currents within the NHK. Some publications reflect the crystallization of a particular person's stance on the issue.

This section attempts to arrange the complex of debates and stances in a clear manner. To achieve this, several publications are grouped together, especially those that are part of a polemic. In general, the review follows a chronological line. First, three publications that appeared early in the 1860s are examined (2.8.2.1-3). Then there is a review of the course of events surrounding two issues as they were debated at synods (2.8.2.4-5). Subsequent to this there is a view of the polemics between Pierson and Chantepie de la Saussaye on ecclesiastical tolerance (2.8.2.6). There follows a review of the events surrounding the establishment of two Juridical Calvinist associations (2.8.2.7). These reviews are intended to give the reader sufficient background to consider a number of debates and stances on confessional subscription that will be described (2.8.2.8-12), including two issues related to confessional subscription addressed by synods during the late 1860s (2.8.2.13-14). This section closes with a brief look at the Union of 1869 among the Seceders (2.8.2.15).

2.8.2.1 JURIDICAL CALVINISM: G. GROEN VAN PRINSTERER

During the eighteenth century there was a great deal of contact between conservative reformed Christians in European countries such as Scotland, France, The Netherlands, Germany, and Switzerland. At a certain stage, Groen felt compelled to explain the Dutch situation for the sake of the French speaking Reformed abroad. In 1860 he published a booklet in French on the Anti-revolutionary and Confessional Party in the NHK. As a summary for outsiders of what was the confessional persuasion within the NHK, it gives insight into how Groen viewed the situation at this stage.

Groen considered his party to be anti-revolutionary because it did not want to leave the NHK prematurely. He considered his party confessional because it sought to maintain the main truths in the confessions. He described the programme of the confessional party in the NHK as follows:

to demand resistance in the name of the church, with an appeal to its confession and history against the perpetual upsetting of central truths, and so to reunite faithful members around the foundations of its faith; on the other hand to fight against ultra-orthodoxy and to take into consideration the needs and situation of our time.

³¹¹ On the history of the Ledeboerianen see Hofman, *Ledeboerianen en Kruisgezinden*. Ledeboer was deposed in the NHK in 1841. Subsequent to his deposition he joined the CAGK but soon parted ways with them.

As on previous occasions, this document also does not precisely clarify what Groen considered binding. Thus it again evidences that Groen's standpoint on the character of confessional subscription wavered between substantive and essential binding. This publication is worth further note because it provides a succinct and lucid description of what the Juridical Calvinist cause entailed as Groen distinguished this current from both liberals and ultra-conservatives.³¹²

2.8.2.2 JURIDICAL CALVINISM MEDICALLY FLAVOURED: O. G HELDRING

In 1854 the *Christelijke Vrienden* disbanded as an association. However, the philanthropic Rev. O. G. Heldring of Hemmen continued to publish its journal, *De Vereeniging: Christelijke Stemmen*. Within the Calvinist camp, Heldring had always been somewhat equivocal about confessions. Sometimes his stance was medical and almost ethical, at other times his stance was juridical.³¹³ In 1860 he published the following 20 theses on the issue of confessional subscription and doctrinal liberty.

1. Confessional writings contain the fixed doctrinal concepts belonging to the unity in faith already present in the church.
2. The aim of such a confession is to be thetical, anti-thetical and declarative.
3. Without confession there can be no church, just as without ordered society there can be no state.
4. Confessions were not contrived but stem from inner necessity. New confessions build upon the old.
5. Scripture is no confession: every heretic has his text.
6. Confessions rest on Scripture as *sola regula fidei*; confessions articulate what the church has understood Scripture to say.
7. Only confessions are constitutional for the church, regulations and cult flow forth from these.
8. Reformed churches do not canonize their confessions: there remains a *quatenus* alongside the *quia*.
9. As common expressions within the ecclesiastical community, confessional writings have authority over all the individual members of that community.
10. The church that has laid down the norm of its faith in the confession has the right to bind its ministers to these, and the authority to watch over its doctrine. Confessional writings restrict doctrinal liberty.
11. Confessional writings are not perfect; however, they are considered the most perfect by the church that holds them.
12. Should a person feel the urge to diverge from the confession in a minor point, he ought to submit to the confession because it is ecclesiastical. Subjective confessions in development may never replace the objective confessions of the church.
13. The science of theology has the right, biblically and ecclesiastically, to revise the confessional writings.
14. Developing theology always seems to be heterodox. True heresy is that which denies the essence of Christianity. Heresy always develops around the person of Christ.
15. If theology were more accepted within the church, there would be more room for apparent divergences.
16. Such a situation would be provisional: eventually it would mean reformulating the confessional writings.

³¹² Groen van Prinsterer, *Partij*. The quote is from page 44.

³¹³ Heldring's biographer, A. van der Hoeven, attributes this to Heldring's emotional and impulsive character (Van der Hoeven, *Heldring*, 211).

17. In the meantime, it is the task of all to hold onto the ancient confessional writings. Our divergences should come out in the open only with childlike respect. We should further wait in faith until the Lord of the church grants us a new formulation, which will only be produced in a most vehement struggle.
18. If one labours faithfully along the lines stipulated above, the church will come to renew its confessions.
19. All confessing ought to fight subjectivism, separatism, and formalism.
20. The concept of "liberty" should be seen as the opposite of "licentiousness." Doctrinal liberty within the NHK is bound by the character and essence of this body. Both licentiousness and everything that hinders free development within the bounds of the character and essence of the NHK should be resisted.³¹⁴

These theses are remarkable for their clarity and brevity, but above all for the simplicity with which they outline the Juridical Calvinist position. In this document, Heldring takes a step back and attempts to present an overall, somewhat abstract description of the role of confessions in a church, in which he seems to have succeeded brilliantly. As Van der Hoeven remarked, it is regrettable that Heldring did not publish more on this issue.³¹⁵

One of the advances in Heldring's publication is that he more clearly defined the relationship between confessional writings, the church, and theology as a science. This is understandable in view of the fact that Heldring was a minister and thus, unlike most prominent Juridical Calvinists, had to deal daily with the problem of confessional fidelity and development of theology. In addition, one may detect an Ethical influence in theses 14-17. Especially noteworthy is Heldring's claim that a confessional writing can only be born from the most vehement of struggles. From thesis 20 it is evident that Heldring wished to distance himself from the Liberals, Seceders, and Traditionalist Calvinists. The Apologists and Ethicals were not within his firing range.³¹⁶

2.8.2.3 ETHICALISM: J. H. GUNNING JR.

Within the NHK it was regulated that every church would be visited by representatives of the association of churches (via the classis) to see whether matters were being conducted in good order. In two out of every three years this church visitation took the form of a questionnaire that the church council was requested to fill in. One of the questions asked whether the office bearers and the church were faithful to the confession. In 1861, the Church Council of Amsterdam responded, "Since synod cannot tell us what our confession is, we cannot judge whether we are faithful to the confession. Moreover, we believe the church boards can only function administratively, therefore it is improper for them to ask a question of this nature." Other churches also left the question unanswered.

Rev. J. H. Gunning jr. of The Hague seized this occasion as an opportunity to publish his views on the freedom of the congregation and the structure of the NHK. This publication requires attention. Although not specifically addressing the issue of confessional subscription, it is important for this present study as it gives insight into the underlying thoughts of this second father of Ethicalism.

Central to Ethicalism was its anti-intellectual stance. Gunning in particular made clear what this meant. He wrote that the war with heresy is waged not with weapons of regulations and rights and doctrines but with the power of Word and Spirit, and it is won not by the application of laws and confessions but by an appeal to the conscience seeking to convince. In this way an attempt had

³¹⁴ Heldring, "Eenige thesis".

³¹⁵ Van der Hoeven, *Heldring*, 273. On the other hand, Heldring came to be an influential man as he was appointed chairman of the Confessioneele Vereniging (see 2.8.2.7).

³¹⁶ In 1870 Heldring wrote to Groen that he considered himself to belong to both the parties of Beets and Groen (Groen van Prinsterer, *Briefwisseling* 6/5:403, dd. 21-05-1870).

been made to underpin the Medical Calvinist position on church reform and broaden its application to the role of confessions as a whole.

Gunning also introduced a new factor into the scheme of things, that of the congregation. He opined that neither the individual nor the church (association of congregations) but the congregation determines what is and what is not the truth. It is the Spirit, working in the conscience of the congregation (this conscience would seem to be the consensus of the congregation) that determines what is acceptable and normative. One of the implications of this stance is that while it is clear that some doctrines are correct and some are not correct, the line between these two cannot be easily drawn; Gunning compared pinpointing this line to pointing out the permafrost-line on the tundra.³¹⁷

2.8.2.4 SYNODICAL AFFAIRS I: CATECHISM PREACHING AND LITURGY

Between 1859 and 1863 a somewhat curious and unsettling debate took place at the annual synods concerning the existence or non-existence of obligations (a) to preach from the Heidelberg Catechism and (b) to sing at least one hymn per worship service. This debate was *curious* because it combined two issues that appear unrelated. It was *unsettling* because the conservative camp preferred to remove the obligation to sing hymns, and to maintain the obligation to catechism preaching, while the liberal camp tended to prefer the converse: removal of the obligation to catechism preaching and maintenance of the obligation to sing hymns. The complicating factor was that successive synods tended towards either enforcing both or not enforcing both.

This issue will now be described in greater detail, since it illustrates well how synods operated. It will become clear that synods took seriously their task of administering the NHK, but also did not want to do more than administer the NHK.

It had become clear in several quarters of the NHK that ministers were no longer required to preach from the Heidelberg Catechism once a week. This did not meet with universal approval and thus, in **1859**, the synod was petitioned to make the practice compulsory again. Synod's advisory committee advised the synod not to make catechism preaching compulsory. No one had objected to this deletion in the SRK in 1856-1857, and reinstating it would cause unrest in the church. It further pointed out that deletion of this regulation did not mean the practice had become illegal. Hence it advised the synod to declare clearly that preachers were still free to preach from the catechism. The synod decided in accordance with this advice.³¹⁸

Certain parties were not satisfied with this decision and appealed it in **1860**. CA The Hague believed there to be an inconsistency in the liturgical practice of the NHK. While catechism preaching was no longer compulsory, the requirement to sing at least one evangelical hymn per worship service had been maintained. The petitioners requested the synod to re-regulate the practice of catechism preaching. However, the advisory committee was not so keen on the idea. In 1852, the retention of catechism preaching had already met with much protest. Moreover, reintroducing the custom would mean consultation with the provincial boards and classical associations, and thus cause much unrest. It further noted that ministers had not been forbidden to preach from the catechism. Finally, the advisory committee noted that the retraction of this provision in no way damaged the confessional character of the Heidelberg Catechism, since preaching on the Belgic Confession and Canons of Dort³¹⁹ were not required either. On catechism preaching, the advisory committee advised Synod to note and decide that:

³¹⁷ Gunning, *Vrijheid*.

³¹⁸ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1859:124-125 (request), 135, 143 (deliberation and decision). The advisory committee consisted of W. Muurling, J. F. Wetter, J. B. F. Heerspink, D. G. Kortenbout van der Sluijs, and P. Jas.

³¹⁹ Remarkable is the fact that the Canons of Dort are listed here. Do these or do these not belong to the 'adopted Forms of Unity'? The fact that the Canons were included here may be due to the fact that J. I. Doedes was reporter for the advisory committee.

Historical Part

1. the present regulations on this point have been adopted without protest from within the churches;
2. ministers still have the freedom to preach from the catechism; and
3. a new regulation on this point is unnecessary.

The advisory committee then addressed the issue of compulsory hymn singing. It noted that the custom of singing hymns was introduced when the new hymnbook was published in 1807. In several provincial regions, the singing of hymns was made compulsory via provincial regulations. However, the advisory committee believed that because such a regulation concerns a general matter, it ought to have been confirmed by synod under the new AR. Since no synod had done this, the regulation had by default been suspended. Simply put: CA The Hague was in error when it presumed that the obligation to the singing of at least one hymn every worship service still existed. The advisory committee advised the synod to inform CA The Hague of this. Synod 1860 unanimously adopted this report and acted accordingly.³²⁰

The issue resurfaced in **1861**. Elder Wetter, a synod member, moved that the synod clearly regulate that both catechism preaching and the singing of at least one hymn per service were compulsory by amending SRK 21 to this end. It was also placed on the synod's agenda via a number of submissions, one of which requested a reconsideration of Groningen's proposal in 1831 (see 2.4.4). In reporting on this motion and these submissions, the advisory committee noted that all assumed that both obligations still existed whereas Synod 1860 had clearly stated that neither obligation existed. As far as it was concerned, the synod could chose from one of three approaches:

1. It could decide that Synod 1860 erred. However, Synod 1861 was not entitled to sit in judgment over Synod 1860.
2. It could adopt motion Wetter. However, there would be much protest against both compulsory catechism preaching and compulsory hymn singing.
3. It could amend AR 62 in a way that made it clear that both regulations had been abolished.

However, this would diminish the practice of both.

Given this impasse, the advisory committee advised the synod simply to acknowledge receipt of the submissions, express its appreciation for both practices, and leave it at that. During the deliberations on this issue, it became clear that not all synod members were convinced that Synod 1860 had correctly stated that the singing of at least one hymn per worship service was no longer compulsory. Others noted that the provisions for catechism preaching had been legitimately dropped, and the provision for the singing of hymns had only been temporary to make people acquainted with these hymns. After a period of deliberation the matter was put to the vote and the vote tied. A re-vote the following day also tied. The synod then decided to issue a pastoral letter in which it declared that it considered both stipulations legitimately lifted in view of the fact that this had never been clearly stated. The letter also noted that this did not mean that the practices are at odds with the regulations of the NHK and thus all churches were encouraged to continue both practices.³²¹

In **1862** the matter took a new turn. The abstract discussion on "what should be regulated" became the concrete question of "what has been regulated." On August 30, 1860, the church council of 's Grevelduin-Capelle had asked its minister no longer to force the congregation to sing hymns, and the minister had complied. On March 12, 1862, CB Heusden judged that at least one hymn had to be sung in a worship service, and called the church council to order. The church

³²⁰ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1860:100-104 (report), 130-132 (deliberations and decision). The advisory committee consisted of J. I. Doedes, J. Tichler, A. Slotemaker Cz, G. W. Sannes, and H. L. Oort.

³²¹ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1861:9-10 (proposal Wetter), 185-191 (report), 302-306, 324, 326-327, 333-334, 346-347, 364 (deliberations and decisions). The advisory committee consisted of H. J. Spijker, P. Hofstede de Groot, H. Huijsers, J. J. Metzlar, and L. Lasonder.

Historical Part

council appealed the matter to the provincial board, which annulled the decision of the classical board. The classical board subsequently appealed the matter to the ASC, which judged that it was not competent to decide on the issue and passed the matter on to synod. The issue was complicated by the fact that the classical board considered the matter one of “ecclesiastical supervision” while the provincial board believed it to be a matter of “ecclesiastical discipline.” The issue of catechism preaching and hymn singing was also placed on the synod’s agenda on account of a submission from the church council of Harlingen, which noted that the decisions of 1860 and 1861 contradicted each other.

The advisory committee was of the opinion that the provincial board should have been more pastoral in its approach and that the classical board should allow the church councils more freedom. It advised that the obligation to sing hymns should not continue to exist, stating the following grounds:

1. the measure had achieved its purpose, the hymns were known;
2. if congregations refused to comply, they cannot be compelled;
3. maintaining this obligation causes dissatisfaction and unrest; and
4. the church is now so well advanced that coercion and laws are no longer necessary.

The advisory committee further noted that the decision of 1861 should not be rescinded. It would be better to receive the advice of the church in this matter via the provincial boards and classical associations. Hence the advisory committee advised:

1. to properly abolish the obligations on the singing of hymns and preaching of the catechism;
2. to change SRK 23 to make it clear that ministers have the freedom to determine liturgical practices in keeping with the needs and desires of the congregation, where necessary in consultation with the church council.

Synod followed this advice and provisionally adopted a new text for SRK 23.³²²

In **1863** it became clear that the majority of provincial boards and classical associations approved the changes. One of the issues that remained was whether the change to SRK 23 was in fact the correct approach to solve the problem. Elder Wetter proposed to change SRK 21 such that both catechism preaching and the singing of hymns were encouraged. The advisory committee considered no less than six approaches to the issue. These are given below, noting the reactions the committee gave to the synod:

1. “It is not necessary to undertake any action.” Reaction: not true, given the discussions of the past few years.
2. “The issues of catechism preaching and singing of hymns should not be lumped together.”³²³ Reaction: they should be considered together since both concern liturgical practices.
3. “The obligations should remain.” Reaction: this would create a church in which people are coerced to preach something and coerced to sing something, while it should happen from the heart. Only complete freedom will restore the church. If this causes confusion in the church, “a bit of strife and suffering will harm no one.”
4. “Remove from SRK 23 the words ‘as much as possible.’” Reaction: no, for the minister determines the contents of the service.
5. “The proposal is unclear.” Reaction: it is true that the expression “as much as possible” gives rise to ambiguity. It would be better to change SRK 21.

³²² *Handelingen...NHK...* 1862:304-309 (report), 402-403 (deliberation and decisions). The advisory committee consisted of W. Muurling and S. F. van Hasselt.

³²³ It was especially Doedes, reporter for the advisory committee in 1860, who had noted this. Doedes expressly stated that he no longer held the viewpoint he had held in 1860 concerning the issue of catechism preaching having become convinced that it was more than just a liturgical issue.

6. However, we believe it would be best to change SRK 22 by inserting an extra paragraph. The synod decided in accordance with the advice of the advisory committee and amended SRK 22. It considered it unnecessary to consult the church again on the matter and confirmed the text.³²⁴ The change implied that ministers were entirely free to shape the worship service as they saw fit as long as they took into account the religious needs of their congregation.

Some considerable space has been used to describe the course of events surrounding this issue in order to give the reader a taste of how synods operated. They clearly took seriously their task to administer the NHK. On the other hand, synods obviously wanted also to do *no more* than administer the NHK. A discussion of underlying principles was generally avoided. Decisions were taken based on current legislation and expediency. Issues that concerned people on account of their relationship to doctrine were degraded to mere liturgical practices. The only principle brought to bear on the situation is the concept of “freedom,” that in the church one should exercise faith in freedom for only then can one be sure that faith is genuine. It is noticeable how for the synods man became increasingly determinative for the essence of religious experience. Successive synods gave the impression that the church exists to satisfy one’s religious needs in co-operation with likeminded people. The discussion on liturgical practices is an illustration of how discussions on “doctrine” were avoided. The activity of administering the church had effectively obscured the goal of maintaining doctrine (AR-1852 art. 11).

2.8.2.5 SYNODICAL AFFAIRS II: DOCTRINAL LIBERTY³²⁵

Between 1859 and 1865, synods were annually confronted with the issue of doctrinal liberty. Sometimes the issues of one year were related to those of a previous year, and sometimes they stood on their own. This subsection presents an overview of various issues and events that illustrate how synods continually appealed to their incompetence in the field of doctrine to avoid having to take decisions on issues. At the same time, this period illustrates how Ethicalism and Groninger Theology came to dominate synodical decisions.

In **1859** I. da Costa stood at the head of a large petition movement. His petition consisted of a total of eight requests and was especially concerned with the organization of theological education in The Netherlands. Relevant to this study is the eighth request:

That synod at every opportunity do everything possible to avoid the impression that the factually existing freedom of doctrine not appear to be legalized in a school of thought, with a view to repression of the doctrine of the Church and of those who confess it.

The synod followed the advice of its advisory committee to accede to this request since Synod should not restrict freedom of conscience, yet should ensure that freedom *in* Christ does not become freedom *from* Christ.³²⁶ At this same synod, elder Escher, member of the synod, moved that the synod issue a declarative statement on the historicity of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. Synod took note of this request but pointed out that it did not belong to its task to issue such a declaration.³²⁷

It is noted that Da Costa’s request was vague: it did not specify which doctrine it concerned. Hence liberals could accede to the request. With respect to Escher’s motion, the synod could not

³²⁴ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1863:10-11 (proposal Wetter), 224-242 (report), 269-270, 272-273 (deliberations and decisions). The advisory committee consisted of J. C. Zaalberg Pz, L. W. E. Rauwenhoff, and R. C. H. Römer.

³²⁵ See Van Oosterzee, *Synode*, 163-277 for a compilation of materials relating to the years 1859-1863.

³²⁶ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1859:126-134. The advisory committee consisted of B. ter Haar, J. P. H. Reijers, G. J. C. Harmesen, J. F. C. Kronenberg, D. C. Thomkins, and J. C. A. van der Meer van Kuffeler.

³²⁷ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1859:68-69, 136-137 (proposal), 154-156 (report of advisory committee consisting of N. C. Kist, B. ter Haar, and W. Muurling), 173-174 (deliberation and decisions).

have issued such a declaration without drawing the position of several synod members into question.³²⁸

In 1860 the issue of doctrinal liberty was tabled for four different reasons. The first concerned the presence of elder Van Heusden who had written articles for *De Dageraad*, an atheistic journal intended to undermine every form of religion. The synod decided to denounce the journal, stipulated that those who wrote in its pages could not be members of ecclesiastical boards, and reprimanded Van Heusden. Nevertheless, Van Heusden was seated as a member of the synod.³²⁹

The second issue concerned the application of FS-1852. Rev. J. Witkop, an avowed Groninger and a synod member, asked whether a candidate who denies the historicity of the resurrection and is admitted to the ministry has not contradicted the declaration he subscribes via FS-1852. Synod agreed with Witkop's concern but pointed out that it was not the appropriate body to answer this question. This, Synod felt, was a matter for the provincial board that admitted the candidate.³³⁰

The third issue was related to Synod 1859's refusal to reintroduce Catechism Preaching. The majority of the members of CA Harderwijk

[took] this opportunity to bemoan the full freedom which, as far as they are concerned, is given to the teacher to lay aside the confession of the Church, and not only this, but also the freedom to deny the historical facts of Scripture and to present in public all manner of artfully contrived fables.

Similar concerns were expressed from other parts of the NHK. The advisory committee advised the synod not to concede to any one theological school of thought and to ensure that "order does not become coercion, freedom does not become licentiousness for either teachers or congregational members." The advisory committee believed the days of "form-coercion" to be history, and that the regulations sufficiently directed attention to God's Word. In concurrence with this advice, the synod published a short notice in the official church magazine, stating that it believed it was properly fulfilling its duty.³³¹

The fourth issue related to church visitation. In 1860, several church councils left the question on "blameless in confession" blank, pointing out that they did not know what "confession" entailed. The synod decided that these churches were in error for so doing: the decisions taken in 1841 and 1842 applied to ministers and the questions asked each Lord's Supper celebration indicated what was expected of elders and deacons.³³²

The decisions taken in 1860 make clear that the synod was not purely concerned with administering the church. It was willing to take a decision with respect to a doctrinal issue as long as it did not burn its fingers. Thus *De Dageraad* was denounced while Van Heusden was seated. Also, agreement was expressed with Witkop's concerns but the hot potato was passed on. Again, it pointed to *synodical* decisions taken in 1817, 1841 and 1842 to define "confession" but refused to take decisions of a doctrinal nature.

³²⁸ At least Rev. P. A. C. Hugenholtz (Escher's own minister) and Rev. J. C. Zaalberg, who had both publicly denied the historicity of the resurrection and ascension.

³²⁹ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1860:3-4, 25-28, 89-91 (report), 114-120, 168-169 (deliberation and decisions). See Rasker, *De NHK vanaf 1795*, 165; Van Oosterzee, *Synode*, 172-182; Volger, *Vrijheid*, 125-132.

³³⁰ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1860:7, 14, 139-144 (advisory report from J. I. Doedes, J. Tichler, A. Slotemaker Cz., G. W. Sannes, and H. L. Oort), 164-166, 168-169 (deliberation and decisions). See Van Oosterzee, *Synode*, 183, 190-191.

³³¹ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1860:17, 25, 38, 139-144 (report), 164-169 (deliberation and decisions). The advisory committee was identical to the one mentioned in note 329.

³³² *Handelingen...NHK...* 1860:139-144 (report), 168 (decision). The advisory committee was identical to the one mentioned in note 329.

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In **1861** there was just one matter. Nine church council members of Oud-Beijerland requested the synod to return to the norms of GS Dordrecht 1618-19. Synod 1861 merely acknowledged receipt of this request.³³³

Synod **1862** received three submissions initiated by Rev. F. P. L. C. van Lingen of Zetten-Andelst and signed by 364 persons. These noted that doctrines still maintained in 1854 were now being denied from pulpits. The petitioners were under the impression that the synod approved of this. According to the advisory committee, the petitioners had gone too far in stating that some NHK teachers had dishonestly signed FS-1852. The heart of man cannot be judged by another, it opined. When this report was discussed, Rev. J. A. Stoop, Walloon minister in Nijmegen, noted that doctrinal liberty is only a temporary measure until the church improves along the ethical path and is re-founded on the confessions. Many synod members expressed agreement with the idea of improving along the ethical path though they rejected the goal of the church being re-founded on the confessions. The synod unanimously adopted the advisory report. This course of events makes clear that Ethical ideas had also found their way to the table of the synod.³³⁴

In **1863** an elder of the church in Rijk asked the synod how he was to “maintain doctrine.” The synod directed him to CB Alkmaar for an answer. In the same year the ASC received an instruction to study

whether and to what extent it is advisable to rescind all the regulations relating to [baptism] or the admittance of members, or whatever else there might be in the regulations, which place a certain coercion on congregational members, and to grant them unhindered freedom to act in accordance with their conscience.³³⁵

In **1864**, discussion on doctrinal freedom reached new heights. There was a barrage of submissions on various matters from both conservative and liberal camps. The submissions were classified into the following nine groups by the advisory committee:

1. Submission Huydecoper: is modernist theology permissible given the form of subscription?
2. Submission Koster *cum suis*: can Rev. Zaalberg continue to be tolerated in the church?
3. Church Council of The Hague: what precisely is the task of elders with respect to doctrine?
4. Elder Visser of Rijk: could you explain the response I received from CB Alkmaar?
5. Walloon elders of Amsterdam: please tell us where the boundary lies between what is and what is not permissible on the point of doctrine.
6. Harderwijk: we advise the synod to prescribe subscription to the Apostles' Creed.
7. 15 addresses: we advise the synod to prescribe subscription to the Three Forms of Unity.
8. 2 addresses: of the same contents as those listed in 7 with the added requested that doctoral students no longer be required to follow the examination for candidates.
9. CA Kampen: please remove all references to “maintenance of doctrine” from the regulations.

These submissions meant two things. First of all, Synod 1864 was truly caught between a rock and a hard place. At one and the same time it was being requested to tighten up (submissions 6-8) and to liberalize (submission 9) the regulations on the point of doctrine. Secondly, the matter of

³³³ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1861:343.

³³⁴ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1862:434-442 (report), 454-457 (deliberation and decisions). The advisory committee consisted of B. ter Haar, A. Kuenen, and A. T. Reitsma.

³³⁵ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1863:179 (elder's request), 318-319 (instruction to ASC).

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“persuasive reorganization,”³³⁶ albeit not yet seen as such, had been placed on the agenda of the synod (submissions 1, 2 and 5).

The advisory committee noted that AR art. 11 was untouchable: to be a Christian church the NHK must preach Christ. On the other hand, the creation of a form of doctrinal binding on which all parties could agree was considered impossible. During plenary debate, various motions were tabled including the suggestions to issue an official explanation of FS-1852 and to reinstate FS-1619. After much debate the synod unanimously decided:

1. the synod is not competent to extend or restrict the “legitimately existing doctrinal freedom;”
2. those who feel the limits of this freedom are being violated should appeal to their classical board;
3. those who feel that “maintenance of doctrine” requires explanation are referred to earlier synodical decisions;
4. the synod will not change existing stipulations regarding doctrinal liberty;
5. all ministers in the NHK are called upon conscientiously to examine themselves whether they are fulfilling their duty properly.³³⁷

A few remarks on this landmark decision are in order. The first decision, because of the phrase “legitimately existing,” implicitly recognized the existence of modernist theology in the NHK. The second and third decisions are clear examples of how the synod in fact tossed the hot potato into the lap of others. The fifth decision is interesting because it was exactly how Ethicals believed a solution to the problem should be found. This decision suggests that the synod, as the sum of the various schools of thought in the NHK, considered the Ethical solution to be the most practicable.

The majority opinion was that the departure of the Modernist Rev. C. Busken Huet (who came to the conclusion in 1862 that his position as minister in the NHK was untenable) was proof that all should examine themselves. However, not all were convinced. In 1866 the modernist Prof. A. Kuenen of Leiden would defend the right of modernists to be members of the NHK.³³⁸

Besides this discussion, there was also the mandate given to the ASC concerning the “freedom of congregational members.” The ASC advised the synod to change SRK 14 (in relation to baptism) and RG 38 (in relation to the admittance of new members). The latter is relevant to this study as RG 38 played an important role in subsequent years. During the discussion, the synod noted that ministers need to respect the freedom of doctrine existing within the church and that it should therefore be possible for candidate members to be admitted as

NHK—RG art. 38

The church council has jurisdiction over the admittance of members.

No one resident in another congregation, is accepted and confirmed as member unless he first has submitted a proper attestation of moral conduct, issued by the church council of his congregation. Once the admittance and confirmation has taken place, the church council where it has taken place shall report this in writing to the church council of the congregation in the place of residence, in order that the admitted and confirmed member might be recorded as such in the membership-list of this congregation.

Prior to the admittance of a member there will be an examination of the gained knowledge of the Christian doctrine of faith and ethics, biblical and church history, especially that of the reformation; should this knowledge be considered sufficient, it is followed by a profession of faith by the candidates. The various actions take place by a teacher, assisted by one or more elders.

³³⁶ Organising the church in such a way that each school of thought or persuasion (Modernist, Groninger, Ethical, Conservative and later *Gereformeed*) could profess its faith in walk and talk without putting the cohabitation of these persuasions within the walls of the NHK at risk.

³³⁷ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1864:236-251 (report), 309-310, 313-314 (deliberation and decisions). The advisory committee consisted of A. Slotemaker Czn., J. H. Scholten, Ch. G. Montijn, H. Obreen, and J. J. van Oosterzee.

³³⁸ Kuenen, *Recht*.

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members of the NHK in a congregation not their own. In line with this, the synod expanded the second paragraph of RG 38.³³⁹ Synod concurred with the ASC that there was no need to change the questions asked at a celebration of the Lord's Supper or at the confirmation of new members. The provisionally adopted RG 38 was duly submitted for comment to the provincial boards and classical associations.³⁴⁰

In 1865, the issue of persuasional reorganization was tabled more categorically. Both conservatives and liberals had problems with Synod 1864's first decision. If the freedom of doctrine that *de facto* exists in the churches is considered "legitimate" does this not imply a *de jure* existence? Should the answer be yes, what then is the meaning of "maintenance of their doctrine" in AR art. 11? CA Goes and PB Overijssel merely posed the question. CA Kampen went a step further: in view of this discrepancy, is it not high time that AR art. 11 be removed? CA Deventer and CA Utrecht argued the other way: in view of the regulations, especially the existence of AR art. 11, there can be no freedom of doctrine. The conservative Rev. T. C. R. Huydecoper of The Hague suggested that if a synod is not competent to decide on doctrinal issues, all references to doctrine should be removed from the synodical regulations. The discussion on freedom of doctrine was also initiated by two other events. There were protests from Nijmegen against the rationalist preaching of two liberal ministers, and there were protests from Zeeland against the admission to the ministry of candidates who denied the bodily resurrection.

As in previous years, the advisory committee advised against any undertaking on the part of the synod. It noted that there is no perfection in this world. It is beyond human and the synod's power, the report stated, "to purify the Church and to maintain her doctrine." The synod concurred with the advice given and decided:

1. to say nothing more on the phrase "existing doctrinal freedom";
2. to remove nothing from the regulations concerning "doctrine"; and
3. "to continue to promote the justified liberty of congregational members" without disturbing the peace.³⁴¹

Once again, the synod attempted to solve the problems it was facing by remaining within the confines of the existing regulations and not being specific—for what does "promoting the justified liberty of congregational members without disturbing the peace" entail?

Synod 1865 further discovered that many provincial boards and classical associations had objections to the new version of RG art. 38. A revised text was adopted with a vote of 10-6 as confirmed. In 1866, the ASC could report that RG art. 38 had been accepted.³⁴²

In 1866 the issue of doctrinal liberty did not return to the table of the synod. In fact, it was not until 1870 that the discussion began to flare up again at synodical level.

During the years 1859-1865, successive synods continued the policy that had been followed since the early 1830s: an appeal to the incompetence of synods to judge doctrinal matters and an attempt to remain with and uphold the existing regulations. As far as the synods were concerned, doctrine and doctrinal binding were not synodical matters. Synod existed to manage or administer

³³⁹ Hence it is frequently referred to as RG art. 38.2. In 1878 the matter regulated here in RG art. 38.2 was given an own article, RG art. 40. Interestingly, this paragraph began life as an independent article in 1860 (ASC proposal RG art. 62).

³⁴⁰ *Bijlagen... Handelingen...NHK...* 1864:B.34-36; *Handelingen...NHK...* 1864:18-19, 31-33.

³⁴¹ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1865:226-237 (report), 263-264 (deliberation and decisions). The quote is from page 234. The advisory committee consisted of P. Hofstede de Groot, J. H. Gerlach, A. Kuenen, J. Tichler, and H. L. Oort.

³⁴² *Handelingen...NHK...* 1865:121-125 (report), 145 (deliberation and decision). *Bijlagen...Handelingen...NHK...* 1866:B.13-14.

the NHK. “Managing” implies maintaining “order and peace” and this became its highest priority. In view of this fact, it is not surprising to see conservative notions of the Ethical type surface in decisions. Not all members of the successive synods agreed with the Ethicals on the eventual goal, but the path thereto was considered appealing by many, as became clear in 1862 and 1864. However, it should have been obvious to all concerned that inconsistencies would sooner or later become apparent between accepting an advisory committee report stating synod’s inability to maintain the doctrine of the NHK, and having general regulations stipulating that the main task of church board members—and synod was the highest church board—was to maintain that doctrine. The situation was such that an impudent modernist or a charismatic conservative could easily wreak havoc in the NHK.

These comments require some clarification. The term “the synod” has been employed as if such were a homogeneous institution. From the viewpoint of the regulations, synods were indeed homogeneous: the members of annual synods were in fact the managers of the NHK. As long as synod members remained convinced that their primary task was “to manage,” the issue of doctrine was addressed “regulatively” and synods took decisions almost unanimously. Even elder Escher and Rev. Witkop were satisfied with the discussions that took place. Towards the end of the period discussed, cracks begin to appear with this approach. Tension within the NHK was increasing as ecclesiastical associations adopted diametrically opposed viewpoints.³⁴³ Sooner or later, persuasional loyalties would also put their stamp on synodical decisions. Just as the Dutch parliament had become ripe for party politics,³⁴⁴ Synods seemed headed for discussions of a persuasional character. “Unanimous” decisions would become “majority” decisions and a tied vote would become common.

2.8.2.6 EMPIRICIST MODERNISM AND ETHICALISM: A. PIERSON AND D. CHANTEPIE DE LA SAUSSAYE

In 1864, three Walloon elders petitioned Synod to define the boundary between what was doctrinally permissible and what was not. In response, the Modernist Rev. A. Pierson of the Walloon church in Rotterdam wrote a brochure on intolerance. The Ethical Rev. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye of the Walloon church in Leiden responded with a brochure on the struggle of the congregation. Central in this polemics was the role of doctrine and the right of Modernism within the NHK.

Pierson blackened the conservative camp and argued against every form of doctrinal binding. Orthodoxy, he suggested, is the grave of humanitarianism. To Pierson’s way of thinking, philanthropy is the essence of the church and confessional subscription entirely out of order. Not doctrine but life is essential to Christianity, he wrote: Jesus did not come to teach the truth but to show us what love is. Dogmatism estranges Christ from His own words, Pierson protested, and our teacher is not Paul of Tarsus or the author of the Johannine writings.³⁴⁵

The Ethical Chantepie de la Saussaye took it upon himself to serve Pierson with a reply. His reply made clear that Ethicalism certainly did not want to abolish the confessions altogether. It even seems that Chantepie de la Saussaye had changed his mind somewhat on the place of confessions in the church, since he no longer considered confessional subscription wrong or outdated. As previously, Chantepie de la Saussaye continued to emphasize the person of Christ over his doctrine, “ethics” over “dogmatics.” Thus it was especially the spirit and testimonial

³⁴³ E.g. CA Harderwijk on behalf of the conservatives and CA Kampen on behalf of the liberals. Later it would be PB Utrecht against PB Noord Holland.

³⁴⁴ One of the major changes during the 1840s was the introduction of direct election by the people of the members of the Second Chamber and the introduction of ministerial responsibility. Democratisation of the electoral procedure meant that members of parliament began more and more to be elected to parliament on the grounds of their convictions, not their position in society or governing capabilities.

³⁴⁵ Pierson, *Onverdraagzaamheid*.

power of confessions that Chantepie de la Saussaye considered to be their primary strength and value. He argued against having faith convictions determined and dominated by the natural sciences, as Modernism would have it. Chantepie de la Saussaye was convinced that Modernism could not even be considered a form of Christianity.³⁴⁶

It would seem that Chantepie de la Saussaye, and others with him, convinced Pierson that his position in the NHK was untenable. Pierson had been toying with the idea of leaving the ministry since 1860, and in 1865 he was honourably discharged from office.

2.8.2.7 THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ECPV AND CV

During the late 1850s, the ministerial association *Ernst en Vrede* ceased its activities as a result of internal division. However, quite a number of ministers continued to feel the need for some sort of conservative debating forum for ministers. Hence, very soon after the demise of *Ernst en Vrede*, there were renewed attempts to create a ministerial association.³⁴⁷

In 1860, the conservative Rev. J. G. Verhoeff of Zevenbergen published a series of three articles in *De Vereeniging: Christelijke Stemmen* in which he presented an overview of the struggle against heterodoxy in the NHK over the previous twenty years. He concluded that the division between Juridical Calvinists and Ethicals on the point of church reform was a hindrance to the united front that the conservative camp needed. Verhoeff openly admitted that there were other differences, including disagreement on the orthodoxy of many conservatives. Verhoeff felt these matters had to be discussed and ironed out, and so he called for the organization of a prayer meeting.³⁴⁸

Though the prayer meeting did not quite materialize as Verhoeff had envisaged, a new ministerial association was called into existence under the leadership of Rev. J. J. van Toorenenbergen of Vlissingen in 1862. The association chose the name *Evangelisch-Confessioneele Predikanten Vereniging* (ECPV), as its members wished to be advocates of the confessions only in line with the Gospel (evangel). In 1864, Van Toorenenbergen gave a further explanation of this name: that the time for juridical procedures was past, and the time had come for a spiritual approach by means of the preaching of the gospel. For the issue, Van Toorenenbergen judged, was no longer injustice versus justice, but unbelief versus faith.³⁴⁹

An Ethical flavour is detectable in Van Toorenenbergen's thoughts. It is noteworthy that Rev. J. H. Gunning jr. of The Hague was among the founding members of the ECPV. As with "De Klomp" and *Ernst en Vrede*, the newest ministerial association would prove to be a meeting ground for Ethicals (into which Medical Calvinism had been absorbed) and Juridical Calvinists. In 1865, even the name Evangelical-Confessional was dropped, and the association continued under the general name *Nederlands Hervormde Predikantenvereniging* (NHPV–Netherlands Hervormde Ministerial Association).

The ECPV filled the void left by *Ernst en Vrede*. However, no replacement had emerged for the *Christelijke Vrienden*, the conservative association open to both ministers and non-ministers, which had effectively disappeared in 1854, though Rev. O. G. Heldring of Hemmen staunchly continued to publish its organ. Ministers, elders and laymen alike felt the need for a general organization to streamline efforts to reform the NHK. From within the circle of the ECPV, action was undertaken to initiate such an organization, and on October 12, 1864, a meeting was held to this end. It was chaired by Rev. O. G. Heldring and attended by nearly 70 ministers and more than 50 other persons, among whom was G. Groen van Prinsterer.

³⁴⁶ Chantepie de la Saussaye, *Strijd*.

³⁴⁷ See Vree, "Kraaienplaag", 127-128.

³⁴⁸ Verhoeff, "Wat moet er gedaan worden?".

³⁴⁹ Van Toorenenbergen, *Waar toe evangelisch-confessioneel?*, 21. See 2.8.2.9.

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The meeting had been convened to debate and adopt a draft declaration, which eventually became the foundational principles for the association. These can be summarized as follows:

- a. only to assist those who express “broad-minded and unambiguous agreement” with the foundation of the church, laid down in its confessions;
- b. on the basis of this foundation, to extend the hand of fellowship to all believers in the universal Christian church past and present;
- c. “That the confession of the Church ought to be respected above all church forms and every regulation as the condition for ecclesiastical communion, with the result that no stipulation obstructing the maintenance of this highest good of the Church may be considered binding for its leaders and members;”
- d. “That since no church board does have nor can have the power to relinquish the foundation of the church, the stipulations of the present organization of the NHK, prescribing the maintenance of their doctrine, oblige the church boards to reject unbelief, which at this time reveals itself in the denial of that which is supernatural in Christianity;”
- e. “That if it should appear that the Regulations of the NHK obstruct the rejection of radical unbelief, which is presently being driven in the church, its faithful leaders and members are obliged to maintain their faith-convictions and set aside that church order. Because of the church order, they are not to be accomplices in the destruction of the church; they are not permitted to acknowledge as leaders those who reject the apostolic witness of the Christ; nor any longer to hand over a fellow-believer to the arbitrariness of the attacker who is protected by the regulations;”
- f. every congregation deserves assistance in its struggle against unbelief, as long as that struggle is motivated by pure intentions;
- g. to create an association that will assist *Hervormde* congregations in the present struggle by
 1. Awakening and strengthening a living faith within the congregation;
 2. Providing counsel, guidance and aid to congregations and persons who, on account of ecclesiastical stipulations or through lack of having their spiritual needs filled on account of that situation, live in need;
 3. Having legally removed from our church order all stipulations that are not in agreement with the situation in which the Church finds itself in our days on account of doctrinal freedom.³⁵⁰

These articles were adopted by the meeting with only 8 votes against. Half a year later, on April 27, 1865, Groen van Prinsterer was invited to be its first chairman. He declined on account of ill health, so the task fell to the Juridical Calvinist Rev. G. Barger of Utrecht.

Almost a year later, on April 26, 1866, the association met again. It was then decided to continue under the name *Confessioneele Vereeniging* (CV—*Confessional Association*). Barger explained the name as follows:

A confessional association is, in our opinion, an association that only allows the legally existing confession of the church to decide what has a right to exist in the church, and not science or the conscience or awareness of individuals.

Thus Barger clearly demarcated the CV from Modernism, Evangelicalism, and Ethicalism.

During its first period, the CV was closely involved in the conflicts that upset the NHK. During the issue of the baptismal formula (see 2.8.2.14), the CV made a submission to synod. In view of synod’s ineffectiveness, the CV decided that it would no longer recognize synod as the ruling body of the NHK in spiritual matters and that it would address the congregations directly. Effectively,

³⁵⁰ *Verslag ECPV 1863*; republished in Luteijn, *Honderd Jaar CV*, 11-13. The portions between quotation marks are direct translations.

the CV marginalized itself in the discussions that took place at synod, especially when its attempts failed to set up a counter organization in the form of a league of church councils. Eventually the CV placed itself outside the structures of the NHK and was forced to take a more medical approach to church reform. Over time, the CV took on the form of an alliance of churches within the NHK.

Many confessionals had cherished high expectations of the new association. However, their hopes were soon dashed as internal bickering and several decisions sidelined the CV within the structure of the NHK. Once again, action was obstructed by the combination of how to reform the NHK and the precise extent of doctrinal binding. The more activist confessionals thus turned away and formed a third group (see 2.9.1.5).³⁵¹

As was the case between *De Christelijke Vrienden* and “De Klomp” and between *De Christelijke Vrienden* and *Ernst en Vrede*, the difference between the ECPV and CV lay primarily in two points. The first related to membership: the ECPV was strictly ministerial whereas the CV was an open association. The second related to the issues of church reform and in its wake doctrinal binding: the ECPV took a more medical approach while the CV took a more juridical approach. The parameters of the two societies are clear in the person of the Ethical Gunning: while he was involved in activities of the ECPV, he refused involvement with the CV.³⁵² Although both the ECPV and the CV advocated a “broad-minded and unambiguous binding” to the confessions, in practice the two associations diverged in their standpoint. Interestingly, the stance of both associations must be described as binding to the main substance or essence of the confessions, although it might be noted that the list of binding doctrines in the CV was longer than in the ECPV.³⁵³

2.8.2.8 ETHICALISM AND JURIDICAL CALVINISM: J. H. GUNNING JR. AND G. GROEN VAN PRINSTERER

In a sermon held during Easter in 1864, Rev. J. C. Zaalberg of The Hague denied the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. Conservative church members of The Hague, including G. Groen van Prinsterer, submitted protests to the Church Council. To their surprise, Rev. J. H. Gunning jr., also of The Hague, was unwilling to plead their cause. This event sparked off some “noble polemics”³⁵⁴ between the theologian Gunning and his parishioner, the statesman Groen van Prinsterer, on the course of action to be taken when an office bearer teaches heresy. Although confessional subscription was not the main issue, the topic featured regularly in this vehement debate between two men who considered each other brothers in the faith.

In one publication, Gunning argued that the instrument with which to deal with people like Zaalberg was not the application of regulations but the powerful preaching of the truth. An appeal would have to be made to Zaalberg’s conscience so that he would either come to repentance or leave the NHK. Gunning further noted that the decisions of the church council in The Hague

³⁵¹ For a history of the CV see Luteijn, *Honderd Jaar CV*, 7-65.

³⁵² Vree informed me that between April 1864 and April 1869 Gunning did not participate in the ECPV since he considered it too confessional.

³⁵³ In a letter by Barger to Groen van Prinsterer dated April 15, 1865, Barger complains that Groen defends “a confessional standpoint” and not “the confessional standpoint.” In other words, Barger felt that the CV advocated confessional subscription without stipulating what one was to be bound to. See Groen van Prinsterer, *Briefwisseling*, 4/3:755. On the position of the ECPV Barger had expressed his disappointment already in June of 1864, accusing Van Toorenenbergen of preventing discussion on this point in order to prevent the ECPV from taking a more juridical stance (Groen van Prinsterer, *Briefwisseling*, 4/3:693).

³⁵⁴ Balke, *Gunning en Hoedemaker*, 67.

regarding the issue—the council had decided to seek the advice of the Synod—were too vaguely worded.³⁵⁵

In another publication, Gunning explained why the position of Zaalberg was the natural and logical consequence of Modernism. He argued that the congregation had no reason to be surprised by Zaalberg's preaching.³⁵⁶

Groen van Prinsterer disagreed with Gunning on both scores. According to Groen, there is a limit to doctrinal liberty, and Zaalberg had clearly overstepped that line. He felt that limiting admonishing Zaalberg and defending the Gospel exclusively by means of preaching the truth was inappropriate. For, as Groen argued, law plays its own role in maintaining the truth; authority and regulations are necessary for the external church. Groen believed that the inactivity of church leaders could not be condoned.³⁵⁷

Gunning was not to be swayed by Groen's arguments. In a third brochure, he admitted that he and Groen sought the same goal, but operated along different ways. Gunning understood the Réveil people to consider spiritual life the source of activity whereas Ethicals considered it the goal. Gunning argued that the Lord would in due time decide how the situation might be resolved. He did not consider himself inactive: by the preaching he appealed to the consciences of the congregation and of Zaalberg.³⁵⁸

At this stage in the debate, it is worth noting the similarities and differences between the positions of Gunning and the Seceders. Both Gunning and the Seceders were convinced of the apostate state of the church boards of the NHK. Both also suggested that the Juridical Calvinists were being ambiguous. Gunning and the Seceders diverged on the paths of action to be followed, Seceders choosing the judicial road while Gunning preferred the medical.³⁵⁹

Gunning had stated in one of his brochures that it was naturally up to false teachers themselves to decide how they stood with respect to the church. Groen objected strongly: he felt such a stance was impossible. Thus he reached for the pen again and wrote a tract published in two instalments. The first instalment appeared on July 27, 1864.

Groen reasserted that Gunning's approach to maintaining doctrine—preaching the truth and appealing to the conscience—was ineffective. Groen pointed out that Zaalberg refused to budge, and Gunning's refusal to recognize Zaalberg as a Christian teacher was having no effect. Groen then broadened the discussion by noting that the inactivity especially of the Ethical-Irenical school was partly responsible for the deplorable situation in the NHK. Because Ethicalism believed the church must die before it can re-live, Groen exclaimed that Ethicals were irenic towards the liberals who were killing the church and polemical towards the conservatives who were trying to save it.³⁶⁰

On September 3, 1864, the second instalment of Groen's essay was published. Groen began by making clear what, in his opinion, should have happened in The Hague. The church council should have suspended Zaalberg, and if a higher church board overturned this decision, the congregation should obey God rather than man and consider secession from the NHK. Groen looked further at the issue of confessions in the church. He emphasized that the unifying power of the confession must lie, not in its use as a law book, but in people's feeling at one with its contents. Groen asked himself to what extent confessional subscription should then extend. This would depend, he wrote, on what "the conscience of the church considers to be the main substance and being, the kernel

³⁵⁵ Gunning, *Beginsel of behoudszucht?*

³⁵⁶ Gunning, *Waartoe verwonderd?*

³⁵⁷ Groen van Prinsterer, *Is er geen oorzaak?*

³⁵⁸ Gunning, *Een doel, twee wegen.*

³⁵⁹ Theologically there was far more that separated Ethicalism and the Seceders, but that is beyond the scope of my present concern.

³⁶⁰ Groen van Prinsterer, *Natuurlijk of ongerijmd?*

and power of its Christian confession.” Groen pointed out that not every article of a confession carries equal weight, and not every false teaching immediately cuts an artery. Groen felt at ease with reduction of the confession, even to the point of “You are the Christ,” as long as the logical consequences of such a confession are not denied. Finally, Groen took issue with the Ethical position that doctrinal liberty was a necessary evil in the church. While Ethicals considered it too early for action, Groen felt it was almost too late.³⁶¹

Gunning felt the urge to defend himself and published a tract in response. Gunning could not agree with Groen’s church political approach. He felt Groen’s approach was patterned upon civil society and thus was far too secular. However, the differences went further than church polity, and even touched the area of faith-conviction. Gunning explained that Groen began with the supremacy of Scripture, then analysed Scripture as to its substance, and so arrived at faith-convictions. Gunning himself saw this process in reverse: faith-convictions found resonance in Scripture. It must be said, however, that what Gunning precisely understood by faith-convictions is not clear.

Gunning further responded to Groen by explicitly stating the principle of the Ethical Movement.

We do not take our starting point in man in the (deliberate or not deliberate) separation and prioritization of his mental capability (for only once someone has been born from the Holy Spirit is he able to see and know the truth), but [we take our starting point] in man in his relationship to God as moral-religious being, in Christ the Godman as the one in whom divinity and humanity have not been placed alongside each other nor dissolved in each other, but come to full unity.

Gunning further explained that he was not totally against the application of regulations. However, he felt that the church boards were insufficiently spiritually motivated to undertake such action. He further felt that the congregation should be the party disciplining erring leaders like Zaalberg, and thus preaching was needed to bring the congregation to that awareness. Gunning had little faith in the ability of the church in his day to express its faith in powerful deeds. In his opinion, the Spirit was withdrawing from the church, and thus all things should be left as open as possible.³⁶²

In essence, Groen continued to defend the Juridical Calvinist stance (in his brochures he occasionally points to the Address of 1842 and his *Het Regt* of 1847-1848) with clarification on the point that had remained undefined, the precise extent of confessional subscription. The polemics of 1864 provide the key to understanding Groen’s position properly, for they indicate that Groen’s position was too complex to be simply described as binding to the substance or the main substance (essence) of confessions. As Gunning noted, Groen did not consider all articles of faith equally important. What Gunning failed to realize was that, unlike other conservatives, Groen did not take an individualistic approach to the set of confessed doctrines, and saw the confessions as a whole. To Groen, the doctrine of Scripture was not a list of doctrines but a body, a system. This explains what many considered to be Groen’s ambiguity. Groen was a staunch defender of the Three Forms of Unity, yet he was no opponent of confessional reduction. To his way of thinking, even the simple confession “Jesus is Lord” is sufficient, since it implies every doctrine of Scripture: if the heart is present the body is present. For Groen, adherence to a particular set of doctrines was not sufficient, he tried to discern the underlying motive for such adherence. Because he considered *fides quae* as important as *fides qua*, Groen felt that giving ground in the area of *fides qua* (for the weak in faith) would also give ground with respect to *fides quae* (for those uncertain of certain doctrines). Groen did not consider such doctrinal liberty limitless: it extends as far as what is essential to Reformed Protestant Christianity.

³⁶¹ Groen van Prinsterer, *Confessioneel of reglementair?*

³⁶² Gunning, *Kracht der waarheid*, 46-80.

Gunning's publications form a good—albeit in true Ethical style, convoluted and abstract—exposition of the Ethical position on confessional subscription. Gunning essentially defended the distinction between congregation and church and the necessity of struggle for the congregation to reach a new spiritual height. With Chantepie de la Saussaye, he argued that confessional subscription would be inappropriate at that moment, but a possibility in a future church. Gunning did not clearly define what sort of subscription this would be. His objection to conservative ambiguity on the exact limits of subscription would suggest that Gunning would have advocated a strict subscription (at least substantial) to a newly adopted confession.

These polemics are evidence of the rift that had formed within the conservative camp. Groen was clearly upset about the consequences of the Ethical stance for conservative action, and Gunning remained unmoved regarding the validity of his approach.

2.8.2.9 EVANGELICAL-CONFESSIONALISM: J. J. VAN TOORENENBERGEN

The conservative boat was considerably rocked by the activities of Rev. J. J. van Toorenenbergen, since 1863 the director and secretary of the Mission Association of Utrecht. Van Toorenenbergen had coined the term “evangelical-confessional” as a contrast to “juridical-confessional”. Groen van Prinsterer took particular exception to this since it caricatured the Juridical Calvinists as un-evangelical, and confirmed misconceptions found with Ethicals and Liberals that Juridical Calvinists were formalistic. In 1864, Van Toorenenbergen wrote a pamphlet in which he took an anti-formalist stance and concluded with the following four remarks on the term evangelical-confessional:

1. “evangelical” to emphasize that our struggle is not one of dogmatics but the Gospel;
2. “confessional” to emphasize that the confession stands above the regulations;
3. the juridical-confessional approach has failed; our struggle is not just concerning “right” but concerning our very existence; and
4. the term “evangelical” helps to draw in all those who seek the same goal as we do.³⁶³

In 1865, Van Toorenenbergen published a commentary on the doctrine of the *Hervormde Kerk* as found in its confessions. When discussing article 7 of the Belgic Confession on the sufficiency of Scripture, he presented six theses on Scripture and confessions. While allowing for the existence of confessions, Van Toorenenbergen emphasized that only Scripture is infallible and that the authority of the confessions is merely ecclesiastical. He opined that the main substance and essence of the symbolical writings is the “grasping” (*opvatting*) of the main substance of the Gospel.³⁶⁴

In essence, Van Toorenenbergen's position was a compromise between Juridical Calvinism and Ethicalism. From the right, Van Toorenenbergen maintained an appreciation for the existence of confessions in order to maintain the doctrine (teaching) of the church. From the left, Van Toorenenbergen appropriated the tendency to avoid formalism and consider the issue more deeply. In a sense, Van Toorenenbergen defended the old Medical Calvinist position, albeit with the difference that he, unlike Da Costa, still worked from the Three Forms of Unity. Van Toorenenbergen's position had much in common with that of O. G. Heldring (see 2.8.2.2).

It is clear that Van Toorenenbergen and Groen van Prinsterer differed on the approach to dealing with the situation in the NHK, particularly, it would seem, because they valued the status of the regulations and ecclesiastical boards differently. It is doubtful, however, whether one can fully differentiate between their positions on confessional subscription. Both Groen and Van Toorenenbergen defended the right of a confession in the church, both considered Scripture to have priority over the confession, both felt that confessions should be up-to-date, and both

³⁶³ Van Toorenenbergen, *Waar toe evangelisch-confessioneel?*

³⁶⁴ Van Toorenenbergen, *Bijdragen*.

described the authority of a confession as ecclesiastical. The difference was simply one of emphasis: Van Toorenenbergen, under Ethical influence and probably because he was a church minister, emphasized the necessity of faith to be living and focused attention on the Gospel, whereas Groen van Prinsterer, a staunch Juridical Calvinist and probably because he was a jurist and statesman, emphasized existing rights and the necessity to work within commonly-agreed structures.

2.8.2.10 MODERNISM AND APOLOGISM: W. MUURLING AND J. I. DOEDES

Two other persons who crossed swords over the role of doctrine in the church were the Groninger-turned-Modernist Prof. W. Muurling of Groningen³⁶⁵ and the Apologist Prof. J. I. Doedes of Utrecht. In 1865, Doedes held a lecture on the liberties of theology (as an academic science) and the church. In it he defended the position he had held in the early 1850s (see 2.7.2.8): theology and the church each have their own sphere. Muurling reacted to this lecture with a public letter on the liberty of the church, to which Doedes responded in turn. These two publications serve to give insight into the Modernist and Apologist stances on confessional subscription.³⁶⁶

These polemics make clear that the Modernist and Apologist positions on doctrine in the church differed in their ecclesiology. According to Muurling, the church is an association of people with a religious need, and how this need is met is of no importance. According to Doedes, the church is an association of people with a religious need met in a certain (Scriptural) way. Hence Muurling pleaded in favour of an open church, open to even Roman Catholics, while Doedes specified that the church should set limits of what it considers acceptable. What united Muurling and Doedes, and set them apart from the conservatives, is the fact that both described the church horizontally, as an association of people who have decided to co-operate in the pursuit of satisfying their religious needs. As such, there is no evidence of a spiritual line of argument: all seems to be based on natural arguments, in which contractarian notions played a dominant role.

One important difference between the two authors is that Muurling argued that the church may not have any confession, whereas Doedes felt that having a confession belonged to the essence of the church. Doedes considered Muurling's position strange: even Scholten and Pierson had in the past argued the validity of the confessions. As such, Muurling's position betrays Groninger influences.

Finally, it is important to highlight Doedes' conviction that confessions are binding only for office bearers in the church. To illustrate this, Doedes compared the office bearer with a judge and a cabinet minister. He considered the confessions to be some sort of "law book" in which the will of the church was expressed. Just as the law exists for judges to judge by, and a constitution for ministers to govern by, so confessions exist for church office bearers to teach by. This implies that office bearers need not hold the confession as their own for them to teach it.

2.8.2.11 ETHICALISM: D. CHANTEPIE DE LA SAUSSAYE

In 1865, Rev. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, since 1862 Dutch (as opposed to Walloon) minister in Rotterdam, issued four speeches on "religious issues of our time." The fourth concerned the issue of the NHK, of which a few pages were devoted to the matter of the confession, which present Chantepie de la Saussaye's matured position on the matter.

Chantepie de la Saussaye very succinctly described a triple function for confessions. He wrote: "[the confession] lays the historical foundation on which we lean, points out the road on which we walk, sets the goal for which we strive." This description makes clear an important difference

³⁶⁵ Muurling's crossing over from the Groninger camp to the Modernist camp is generally dated to 1864 when he resigned as editor of *Waarheid in Liefde*.

³⁶⁶ Muurling, *Vrijheid*. Doedes, *Leervrijheid*.

between Ethicals and Calvinists, as Chantepie de la Saussaye understood them. Whereas Calvinists considered the confessions to *be* or to *express* the foundation of the church, Chantepie de la Saussaye pointed out that confessions *lay* this foundation. Calvinists considered confessions to *be* the road along which one must walk and thus to *include* the goal for which one strove, whereas Chantepie de la Saussaye emphasized that confessions only *point out* the road and *set* the goal. Chantepie de la Saussaye thus tried to explain the difference between intellectualism (which considers the articulation of reality to be the ultimate goal) and Ethicalism (which considers life-experience to be the ultimate goal). This raises the issue of the relationship between confessions as means to an end and as an end in themselves. The Ethical position was clearly that confessions are only a means: while the church (in Ethical theology “the world plus the congregation”) is a “confessional church” (*belijdeniskerk*), the congregation is a “confessing congregation” (*belijdende gemeente*). As such Chantepie de la Saussaye continued to be opposed to confessional subscription as a regulative procedure.³⁶⁷

2.8.2.12 THE SECEDERS: S. VAN VELZEN

In 1866, Rev. S. van Velzen, now professor at the Seceder Seminary in Kampen, spoke at the opening of the academic year on the value of symbolical writings. This lecture presents an authoritative and succinct impression of how a prominent Seceder viewed the confessions.

Van Velzen described symbols as “not rules according to which we pattern our faith” but “writings in which we confess our faith” and continued:

these symbols are not bonds, which subject us to the feelings or understandings of people, of assemblies, however worthy; but are writings which pointedly and clearly express what we find in God’s Word; they declare the grounds for our feelings and indicate the mutual agreement of believers; writings, by which we distinguish ourselves from our opponents, declare ourselves against deviating feelings, and in accordance with which we wish to see instruction structured; writings by which we fulfil the Lord’s command, to give account of the hope which is in us, and to depart from those who cause dissent and offence against the doctrine we have learned from God’s Word; writings, finally, whereby we openly acknowledge that we are the Lord’s and prove that we bear the marks of his church.

The matter of confessional subscription as such is not touched on in this speech. However, some interesting statements on the character of confessions are evident. First of all, Van Velzen did not distinguish between the various confessions: even the Reformation confessions are referred to as “creeds.” Secondly, Van Velzen showed an openness towards Lutherans. It would seem that Van Velzen considered Calvinists to have fixed fewer doctrines confessionally than Lutherans and thus felt at ease with Lutheran convictions as long as they were not made binding.

Van Velzen’s address states “Symbols help us not just to say the correct things but also to say things correctly.” For Van Velzen, confessional subscription was clearly not just a matter of binding to the substance of a confession. The form in which the substance is set down also plays a role.³⁶⁸

2.8.2.13 SYNODICAL AFFAIRS III: GENERAL SUFFRAGE³⁶⁹

Since 1852, the AR had stipulated (article 23) that congregational members were to be directly involved in the election of church office bearers. Prior to 1852, the custom had been that the church council proposed to the congregation the names of persons to be ordained as office bearers. A date was set by which objections to appointments had to be submitted by members of the congregation. With due consideration of the objections, the church council then decided whether or not to proceed with the ordination. AR art. 23 was to change this. However, the implementation

³⁶⁷ Chantepie de la Saussaye, *Leven en rigting*, 197-202.

³⁶⁸ Van Velzen, *Waarde*. The quotes are from pages 7-8 and 17.

³⁶⁹ See Kuiper, *Voormannen*, 120-122.

Historical Part

of AR art. 23, which required a new particular regulation, was not without problems. It was not until 1867 that a set of regulations had been confirmed and proclaimed.

These regulations stipulated the following. All male members 23 years of age and older were enfranchised if they had held enfranchised membership for at least a year. Those in receipt of welfare assistance or who were under discipline were not permitted to vote. In congregations with less than a hundred enfranchised members, elections were to take place via a direct vote. In congregations with more than a hundred enfranchised members, elections were to take place with the use of electoral colleges. Effectively, this meant that church councils would now proportionally represent the composition of the local church. Synod decided that each congregation was free to introduce the new system or remain with the old. After four years the congregation would again decide whether to use the new system or stick with the old. Thereafter, this decision would be made once every ten years. For a smooth transition it was decided that, even if the new system was introduced, office bearers appointed under the old system would sit out their terms.³⁷⁰

Under the oligarchic system of 1816, liberals had managed to gain control of most church boards. With the democratization of the system, conservative influence began to encroach on this control. There are several reasons for this. First of all, the more numerous lower social class tended to be conservative rather than liberal, and their influence had been increased. Secondly, conservative members were more duty conscious in their voting than liberal members. Thirdly, around this time the conservatives, who had organized themselves in the CV, found a charismatic and able leader in Dr. A. Kuyper, a formidable man who was often accused, even by conservative colleagues, of turning ecclesiastical affairs into juridical issues and of “playing the system.”³⁷¹

Since most office bearer terms lasted for a period of four years, it took roughly this time for the church councils to reflect the increased influence of the conservatives. The knock-on effects to the higher boards (classical, provincial and synod) became apparent thereafter. It is quite likely that the lengthy flare-up of discussions on doctrinal binding at synods between 1870 and 1887 was directly linked to the introduction of general suffrage.³⁷² Proof of this would appear to be the attempt in 1873-74 to regulate minorities in the church when certain liberal groups considered the power of conservatives threatening. It is further evidenced by the fact that synodical decisions on doctrinal binding were rarely taken unanimously after this year 1873; even advisory committees often failed to present a unanimous advice. This influence waned after the church schism of 1886/7 when the majority of activist juridical conservatives left the NHK.

³⁷⁰ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1866:140-166 (report), 190-195, 197-207 (deliberation and decisions: regulations on 205-207).

³⁷¹ I am thinking in particular of the eventual division between Kuyper and Hoedemaker in 1886 and thereafter. However, his methodical approach—also organisationally—is already evident in 1869 when he wrote an article later published as a brochure indicating that article 23 was not achieving its end (Kuyper, *Artikel 23*). Not only was Kuyper an able ecclesiastical person, he also made his mark on the world of science with the establishment of the Free University in Amsterdam and on the world of politics as leader of the ARP and prime minister of The Netherlands during the first decade of the twentieth century. His epithet “*De Geweldige*” (The Fabulous) is very apt. Much has been written on Kuyper. Although not in vogue in The Netherlands, Kuyper enjoys much attention from scholars at the moment in Britain and America. For a recent annotated bibliography on English works on Kuyper see McGoldrick, *Kuyper*.

³⁷² In 1884 an advisory committee recognised that the implementation of AR 23 was being felt in the lower levels of church government but had not yet reached the level of synod (*Handelingen...NHK...* 1884:255). On the other hand, Kuyper made amply clear that the introduction of general suffrage alone would not be sufficient to help the orthodox to a majority in the higher boards of the church (Kuyper, *Artikel 23*, 21-29).

2.8.2.14 SYNODICAL AFFAIRS IV: THE BAPTISMAL FORMULA³⁷³

Because liberal ministers deviated in their beliefs from the traditional main tenets of the NHK, their practices proved at times to be in conflict with their convictions. Ministers were creative in overcoming such difficulties, but conservatives sometimes felt these ministers went too far. Such was the case when liberal ministers who did not believe in the Trinity refused to use the Trinitarian formula at baptism.

Synod **1868** received a total of 13 submissions on the issue of the baptismal formula. The CV had taken the lead, requesting the synod to make the use of the formula in Matthew 28:19 compulsory. The advisory committee noted that this issue had a doctrinal side and a liturgical side. It pointed out that a synod is not competent to judge the doctrinal side and has to limit itself to the liturgical aspect. The synod was advised that

1. for the sake of uniformity, the same formula should be used everywhere;
2. arbitrary departure from the normal formula is wrong;
3. there is no need to amend the regulations on this point; and
4. the synod is not to decide the validity of baptisms administered with other formulae.

With one dissenting vote Synod adopted this advice.³⁷⁴

In **1869**, the matter was tabled again. There were submissions expressing both agreement and disagreement with Synod 1868's decision. The synod was advised by its advisory committee to leave the precise formulation within the freedom of the ministers but strongly to encourage them to use Matthew 28:19 for the sake of liturgical uniformity. With a moderate majority the synod decided to amend SRK 14 in accordance with this advice and provisionally adopted this change.³⁷⁵

In **1870** it became clear that a slight majority of both provincial boards and classical associations were against the changes made to SRK 14. In view of this advice, the synod decided not to confirm the text and, following the advice of the advisory committee, it explicitly declared that there was no need to regulate anything. In the meantime, conservatives lost faith in synod and so the matter was not tabled again in 1871.³⁷⁶

This course of events illustrates how successive synods remained entirely convinced that they should not discuss doctrinal issues. Just as the issues of compulsory catechism preaching and the singing of hymns were to be considered purely liturgical matters (see 2.8.2.4), so too the discussion of the use of the Trinitarian baptismal formula, considered a doctrinal matter by those who had approached synod in 1868, was kept liturgical. A discussion initiated by an issue of principle (confession of the Trinity) was reduced to a formality (uniform practice in the churches). Not *substance* but *form* was of the essence.

2.8.2.15 THE UNION OF 1869

In 1840 the CAGK and *Kruisgezinden* entered discussions with respect to reunification. These initial attempts drove the two groups further apart. Contact was resumed in 1849, and the two bodies tried to find common ground. Issues such as the recognition of the office bearers of the *Kruisgezinden* by the CAGK,³⁷⁷ the name of the new association, the form of the merger, the form of subscription used by the *Kruisgezinden*, and recognition by the government continued to divide

³⁷³ See Volger, *Vrijheid*, 191-219; Vree, *Kuyper in de Kiem*, 221, 291, 319. For the role of the Confessionele Vereniging see Luteijn, *Honderd Jaar CV*, 53-55.

³⁷⁴ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1868:110-123 (report), 138-139 (decisions). The advisory committee consisted of B. ter Haar, P. A. van der Scheer, J. B. F. Heerspink, and D. Hendriksz.

³⁷⁵ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1869:182-192 (report), 207-212 (deliberation and decisions). The advisory committee consisted of J. I. Doedes, G. Molenkamp, and C. E. van Koetsveld.

³⁷⁶ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1870:10-13, 111-136 (report), 160-168, 195-203 (deliberation and decisions). The advisory committee consisted of J. J. Prins, J. F. C. Kronenberg, D. G. Kortenbout van der Sluijs, and J. Douwes.

³⁷⁷ Like the Scottish Covenanters in the early eighteenth century, the *Kruisgezinden* were at first without ministers. They solved the problem by having their first minister ordained by an elder.

the two associations of churches. The *Kruisgezinden* form of subscription is of particular interest for this present study. When it comes to Forms of Subscription, this was a curious document for by it church council members were bound to a whole raft of documents: GS Dordrecht 1618-19, the [Dutch] Authorized Version [of the Bible], the marginal notes of the Authorized Version, the Three Forms of Unity and Liturgies, three oath formulas found in the Post-Acta of the Synod of Dort, the acts of GS Dordrecht 1618-19, the Post-Acta as a whole, all ecclesiastically approved books of instruction for Schools and catechism, the rhymed version of the psalms of 1773, and “everything that belongs to the Reformed Church, noted as well as not noted; with the same privileges.” In 1869, just prior to the union, Rev. N. J. Engelberts of Zutphen defended the *Kruisgezinden* against the charge of form-coercion in a publication that defended the legitimacy of the *Kruisgezinden* association.³⁷⁸

In 1869, however, these issues were resolved to the satisfaction of both associations. The CAGK recognized the office bearers of the *Kruisgezinden* and dropped the word “*Afgescheidene*” from its name, while the *Kruisgezinden* retracted their form of subscription. The issue of governmental recognition no longer had practical implications due to changes in the constitution and laws of The Netherlands. Furthermore, the union was on the basis of equal parties, each party recognizing the other’s office bearers. Thus, in 1869, the CAGK and *Kruisgezinden* united to form the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk in Nederland* (CGKN—Christian Reformed Church in The Netherlands). Those *Kruisgezinden* who did not join the union continued on their own until 1907, when they united with the Ledeboerianen.

Thus at one stage the Reformed outside the NHK also reflected on the issue of the object of subscription, whether it should be limited to confessions alone or could be taken more broadly. From the fact that the CGKN opted for FS-1619, one can conclude that it was considered unnecessary to bind to more than the confessions of the church.

2.8.3 ANALYSIS

During the 1860s, reflection on confessional subscription in Dutch Reformed circles rapidly gained momentum. A plethora of publications on the issue made for a lively debate, crystallization of ideas, and a further specification of what leading figures thought of confessions and subscription. The aim of this section is to present an overview of how the various factions within the Reformed community in The Netherlands thought on confessional subscription. Issues that underlie or otherwise impacted on the various positions will also be reviewed.

2.8.3.1 CHARACTERISATIONS OF CONFESSIONAL WRITINGS AND THEIR ROLE IN THE CHURCH

The analysis begins by comparing the ways in which the various parties characterized confessional writings and explained their role in the church.

The Modernist Pierson considered them a compilation of fixed dogmas derived from external abstract principles. Such a notion was contrary to his empiricist inclinations and thus Pierson rejected confessions as they functioned, though he did not deny (as, for example, Muurling did) the church the right to have a confessional writing.

Ethicals were somewhat ambiguous about confessional writings. During the 1850s, Chantepie de la Saussaye considered them outdated. However, during the 1860s he described confessions as an instrument to assist the congregation in the passage from the past to the future. Gunning described confessions as the approximate articulation in mental language of life in the heart. Thus Ethicals granted confessions a modest role in the life of a congregation. Opposed to intellectualism and formalism, they emphasized that the final goal was the confessing congregation.

³⁷⁸ It is not entirely clear to me how some of the individual points (e.g. “Synod of Dort” and “Acts of the Synod of Dort” are to be distinguished). See Van Raalte, *GKN*, 200-202.—Engelberts, *GKN*, 111-112.

Calvinists (Juridical Calvinists and Seceders) attributed more importance to confessional writings. Groen van Prinsterer considered a confession a defensive pact, a rallying point, a useful support. Heldring described confessions as compilations of fixed doctrinal concepts that belong to the unity in faith that is present. Van Toorenenbergen struck a somewhat dissonant tone with respect to Juridical Calvinism. He pointed out that Reformed confessional writings had been written primarily for the sake of inimical civil authorities and thus were an exposition of issues that the church felt the state should know. Although Van Toorenenbergen appreciated the confessions, he felt one should not consider all of their contents of similar importance. Nevertheless, Juridical Calvinists considered confessions to play a vital role in the organization of the church. Van Velzen's speech makes clear that on this point the Seceders were one with them. Like Juridical Calvinists in the NHK, Van Velzen expressed high appreciation for the confessions. Such high appreciation did not, however, mean that Seceders considered confessions to be determinative for faith. Just as Juridical Calvinists argued that confessions are not standards of faith but standards for preaching and teaching, so Van Velzen emphasized that confessions do not prescribe faith but describe faith. From this it is clear that Juridical Calvinists and Seceders did not want to ascribe a confession an overruling role in the church. This is important in view of the caricatures of their stance that were sketched by various parties.

In summary, Modernists considered confessional writings to be no more than the expression of a common opinion present in the church at any one moment. Ethicals described them as approximate expressions of the truth to function as guides on the way from the past to the future. Calvinists considered them to a greater or lesser extent lists of matters considered to be divine truth, believed by the church and to be taught by it.

2.8.3.2 CONFSSIONAL SUBSCRIPTION

Turning to the matter of the authority of confessions, to what extent did the various schools of thought consider binding to confessions legitimate?

The Modernists Pierson and Muurling made clear that any notion of confessional binding was out of order. The theses therein expressed could always be superseded by scientific advancement.

The Ethical position is in some ways as enigmatic as Da Costa's position had been. On the one hand, Gunning indicated that he considered every detail of Scripture inviolable such that classifying doctrines according to importance was inappropriate. On the other hand, Gunning suggested that though a line could be drawn between what is fundamental and what is not, such a line could never be a precise boundary but would always remain a grey area. Nevertheless, Gunning considered it important to set a limit so that believers could be distinguished from unbelievers. However, Ethicals refused to be drawn into a debate on the limits of subscription. Yet for Gunning at least, there must have been some sort of limit, else he could never have taken his stand against Zaalberg. It thus appears that Ethicals had no clear-cut definitive stance on confessional subscription.

The position of the Juridical Calvinist school of thought is also difficult to describe. Heldring spoke of a *quia* and *quatenus*. Van Toorenenbergen explained that one is bound to the main substance and essence of the confessions, which are determined by the main substance and essence of the Gospel. Both Heldring and Van Toorenenbergen made clear that confessions were products standardized by Scripture. Heldring and Van Toorenenbergen tended towards the Ethical position, implying binding to the essence or main substance of the confession. However, it would be unfair to describe the Juridical Calvinist school as advocating this form of binding across the board since the school also included men like Rev. G. Barger, who followed in the footsteps of C. M. van der Kemp and A. Capadose. G. Groen van Prinsterer gives the impression of floating between the two, though there are good reasons for wondering whether his approach lends itself to a classification in

which a tally of binding doctrines is the criterion. The conclusion appears to be that the Juridical Calvinist camp continued to waver ambiguously between essential and substantive subscription.³⁷⁹

Turning to Van Velzen, he clearly stood for substantive subscription, although his comment that confessions assist us not just in saying the correct things but also in saying things correctly could suggest that Van Velzen considered confessions directive with respect not only to their substance but also to their form.

For the sake of completeness, it is worth noting that the official position of the NHK continued to be that taken in 1841 and 1842: binding to the spirit and main substance of the confessions which, in view of the actions of the Modernist Zaalberg, was made concrete by each individual as he saw fit. The little sting which binding to the essence and main substance of the doctrine of the NHK had was effectively removed mainly by Ethical opposition to Modernist attacks on orthodox reformed theology: seeking to convince the opposition by appealing to their consciences rather than by applying the regulations.

2.8.3.3 EXTENT AND FOUNDATION OF THE AUTHORITY OF A CONFSSIONAL WRITING

Closely related to the question of the type of subscription are questions concerning the extent and foundation for subscription. With respect to the extent of subscription, it was noteworthy how the Apologist Doedes considered confessional subscription to be a matter just for the office bearers of the church. This stood in sharp contrast to the position of Calvinists such as Heldring and Van Velzen, who considered confessions to be binding for all church members.

With respect to the foundation for subscription, three emphases can be discerned. The Modernist Muurling argued that science should be authoritative in the church and, given the hypothetical character of scientific conclusions, asserted that fixed subscription to such conclusions was impossible. Thus confessions, even when they are the result of academic endeavour, can never be binding. The Apologist Doedes argued that the church operates within its own sphere and thus the church has every right to demand subscription to a set of foundational statements, just as a civil state will bind its governing authorities to a constitution. The Juridical Calvinist emphasis was similar to that of Doedes. Van Toorenenbergen noted that the authority of a confession is dependent on the right and authority of the church. Groen noted that a confession has authority because its articles of faith are common among church members. The Seceder Van Velzen would appear to have taken a third approach: the authority of a confession lies in the fact that the substance of the confession is drawn from God's Word.

The emphasis of the Modernist Muurling indicates a distinct position. However, one would hesitate to deem the emphases of the Apologist-Juridical Calvinists and the Seceders to be two different opinions, for their approaches operated on different planes. The question was: does a church have the right to prescribe what should be taught (is a confession authoritative)? The conservatives *within* the NHK argued affirmatively with the help of contractarian notions since only such could convince the liberals. Moreover, because they were constantly accused of attributing equal authority to Scripture and confessional writings, they emphasized the differences between the two. Conservatives outside the NHK argued affirmatively particularly on the basis of the truth-value of the confession, which it derived from Scripture. Being more removed from the debate within the NHK, the Seceder argument tended to be more balanced. This is not to say, however, that Juridical Calvinists never defended confessional subscription on the basis of the divine authority of its contents, or that Seceders would never appeal to contractarian notions. It is unlikely that the issues were sufficiently crystallized at this stage for such hard and fast conclusions to be drawn. Hence it is prudent to refrain from speaking of clearly distinguished

³⁷⁹ For a more detailed analysis of the positions see Nauta, *Verbindende kracht*, 65-91; Kuiper, *Voormannen*, 170-174 (note that Kuiper's analysis spans the period 1860-1905).

positions and simply note a variance in emphasis, which can be attributed to the context in which those publishing articulated their ideas.

In short, during the 1860s the question had been raised whether confessional subscription extended to all members of the church or only to its office bearers. There were also varying views on the foundation for the authority of a confession. Modernists argued that confessions could not be attributed with authority, whereas Calvinists argued that they did have authority. Within the Calvinist camp the Juridical Calvinists tended to argue on the basis of contractarian notions, and Seceders tended to appeal to the divine character of the doctrines confessed.

2.8.3.4 REVISION OF CONFSSIONAL WRITINGS

The positions with respect to confessional revision are now surveyed. On this issue, the ranks of the conservatives were united. Heldring emphasized that such renewed confession could only be born out of vehement struggle. Doedes noted that scientific development must in the end lead to a repositioning by the church. Van Velzen indicated that confessional revision must always build on what has gone before. Though none were against revision, there was variation: Doedes would have had no problem with a total overhaul of the confessions, Heldring was especially concerned about the fact that a confession must be one of the heart and not just one of the mind, and Van Velzen was not keen on losing what had been gained. As such, Doedes was more liberal than Heldring, and Van Velzen more conservative.

It was noted that in Heldring and Van Toorenenbergen a mediating position between Juridical Calvinism and Ethicalism arose on reforming the NHK and on the authority of the adopted confessional writings of the NHK, a position strongly reminiscent of what was termed Medical Calvinism, as previously defended by I. da Costa and Rev. N. Beets. In relation to authority, Da Costa argued that the power of a confession lies in its freshness, in the sense that “a confession only achieves its end when it is profession.” Such an emphasis is also found with Van Toorenenbergen, who suggested it was time for profession based on the Gospel, not confession using historical documents. On this point, Van Toorenenbergen saw himself at odds with other Juridical Calvinists and coined the terms evangelical-confessional and juridical-confessional. Although Van Toorenenbergen and Heldring would not agree with Da Costa that one should bind literally to any new confession, they did agree that confessions should be up-to-date and heartily believed.

It was Groen who especially felt the scourge of Van Toorenenbergen’s whip. It is not entirely clear, however, whether Van Toorenenbergen correctly understood Groen, since Groen was not wholly aligned with other juridical-confessionals such as Barger. Groen stated that he was even prepared to reduce the confession. Groen was not here saying that some things need not be confessed but that one need not always explicitly confess everything. This is reminiscent of an earlier statement of Groen “professing one’s faith is being frank and honest where the opponent has objections, and is the situation where confession comes with suffering” (see 2.7.2.5). Thus, like Van Toorenenbergen (and Da Costa), Groen saw the importance of profession.

Van Toorenenbergen (as with Da Costa previously) considered up-to-date profession and historical confession a dilemma whereas Groen did not. However, Van Toorenenbergen was correct in positing that other juridical-confessionals did think in terms of this dilemma and took their stance over against him.

In short, no conservatives were opposed to revision of the confession, though the extent to which revision was considered appropriate varied from party to party, with some distinction between the evangelical-confessionals and juridical-confessionals.

2.8.3.5 ECCLESIOLOGY

During the 1860s it became clear what lay behind the struggle between the various schools of thought: their respective ecclesiologies. The position of a school of thought on the nature or

essence of the church determined its position directly with respect to church reform, and both directly and indirectly with respect to confessional subscription.

Modernists viewed the church as an association seeking to satisfy religious needs of individuals, who were free to choose how this satisfaction was attained. The concept of fixed doctrines was foreign to this system of thought, and thus Muurling claimed that even a person who over time came to hold Roman Catholic convictions could be an office bearer in a Protestant church.

The position of synod was that it did not have a *jus in doctrina* but did have a *jus circa doctrinam*. It proved very difficult to apply this in practice, and synod effectively became the administrative organ of the NHK. During the 1860s, synods as much as admitted that doctrinal liberty *de facto* was legitimate. Although strictly speaking one cannot attribute the stance of synods to a particular school of thought, one can discern a Groninger influence herein.

The Apologist position on the church was very much like that of the Modernists: the church was an association seeking to satisfy religious needs. It differed from Modernists in that Modernists allowed freedom in how such needs were satisfied whereas Apologists argued that such needs should be satisfied on the basis of Scripture. Thus the church also had a *jus in doctrina*.

The three positions thus far described had this in common: they all considered the church horizontally as an association of religious persons.

Besides this horizontal line, Juridical Calvinists and Seceders also had a vertical line. The horizontal line was more prominent with Juridical Calvinists than with Seceders, probably because of the context in which Juridical Calvinists published. Nevertheless, both considered it appropriate that a church maintain doctrine because God had commanded it. The church had an explicit mandate from God to preserve and maintain the truth, and confessional writings were the means employed thereunto.

Ethicals advocated an entirely different ecclesiology. They distinguished between the congregation as the body of true believers and the church as the external form of the congregation in which the congregation mixed with the world. Ethicals considered confessions to be the product of the church and thus not necessarily pure in and of themselves. Hence Ethicals played down the importance of confessions.

It is interesting to compare the Calvinist and Ethical positions for a moment. The concepts “church” and “congregation” are dogmatically equivalent for Calvinists but not for Ethicals. The fact that Chantepie de la Saussaye spoke of a confessional church (note the adjective, in Dutch a noun) and a confessing congregation (note the verb) makes clear how sharp this distinction was: the church is static while the congregation is active. It appears that Calvinists did not pick up on this distinction and therefore were puzzled by the Ethical position on confessions.

From the foregoing it can be seen that ecclesiology was determinative for one’s position on confessional subscription in two ways relevant to this present study. First of all, it directly influenced the way in which various schools of thought characterized confessional writings. Secondly, it determined the approach and goal of a particular school of thought with respect to reforming the NHK, which (as noted in previous decades) in turn influenced the way of thinking about the role of the Three Forms of Unity in the NHK.

2.8.3.5 REFORMING THE NHK

Though it was indicated that the position of the various schools of thought about reforming the NHK was determined by ecclesiology, the matter now warrants separate attention. For even those who shared the same ecclesiology could differ in their stance, due most likely to internal differences within the Modernist and Calvinist camps.

Modernists argued there should be room for every school of thought within the church, as long as it sought to satisfy religious need. Thus they advocated complete doctrinal liberty. Convinced the NHK was still too tightly regulated on the point of doctrine, they continually battled against doctrinal binding. Some Modernists, however, admitted the incompatibility of their convictions with those of the NHK and departed.

Ethicals defended such a medical route of reform: convince the false teacher in his conscience of his error (or, should this prove impossible, treat him as a minor), and teach the congregation the truth so that it will reject false teaching. Heresy, Gunning wrote, should be allowed to self-destruct. Gunning was of the opinion that the NHK had reached a low-point and was no longer salvable. Enforcing confessional subscription could not restore the church.

The Juridical Calvinists held varying positions. Heldring pleaded for tolerance towards theology as it develops, since all new things at first appear to be heterodox. Van Toorenenbergen indicated that the struggle within the NHK had become one of faith versus unbelief rather than one between believers who disagreed. Both considered the juridical path to reform to have failed and advocated a medical reform until such point as the juridical path could be followed. Groen, on the other hand, continued to defend the juridical path, although he acknowledged to Gunning that appealing to synod was out of the question, so the battle would have to be waged at the level of the church council. What united the Juridical Calvinists was that they did not consider secession from the NHK warranted. Groen phrased the position clearly: one can only legitimately leave when one is put outside the church.

It was on this score in particular that the Seceders differed from the Juridical Calvinists: they considered the NHK a false church and thus secession was mandatory.³⁸⁰

2.8.3.7 THE SOURCE AND CHARACTER OF TRUTH

Confessions are summations of doctrinal statements that are considered to articulate a truth. As such, the position one adopts regarding the source and character of truth will influence the way one understands confessions, especially their authority. This issue began to play an explicit role in reflection on confessional subscription during the 1860s.

The Modernist Pierson argued that only the natural sciences (via the empirical method) could decide on the truth-value of a matter. Because the sciences were in constant flux, Modernists concluded that authoritative confessions were an impossibility. In the course of the 1860s, Modernists also began to question the possibility of knowledge of the supernatural. This undermined the authority of the confessions of the NHK even further.

The Apologist Doedes used the same method but drew from a different source: he considered Scripture to be a reliable historical record and thus suitable to defend the supernatural. Doedes realized that re-interpretation of Scripture might lead to very different conclusions, and thus he was an advocate of confessional revision.

The stance of the Juridical Calvinists was described by Gunning as follows: on the basis of historical argument they conclude the supremacy of Scripture, and from there they derive from Scripture all sorts of truth. It is questionable whether Gunning sufficiently discriminated between the position of the Apologists and the Juridical Calvinists on this point. In distinction from the Apologist stance, the Juridical Calvinist stance did not depend on historical argument alone: Juridical Calvinists also acknowledged the role of faith and the conscience. Gunning's representation of the Juridical Calvinist position is thus inaccurate. However, it is true that Juridical Calvinists (and other Calvinists no less) presumed the supremacy of Scripture. They continually explained that Scripture and Scripture alone is normative for faith, including the faith found articulated in confessional writings. As has already been observed via Van Velzen, it is precisely because of this relationship between confessions and Scripture that Calvinists argued for confessions having authority.

The Ethicals shared with the Calvinists an appreciation for Scripture. At one stage it even seemed that Gunning was more conservative than Groen, for in their noble polemics, Gunning claimed that every detail of Scripture should be considered inviolable while Groen classified

³⁸⁰ Of course, historically speaking some Seceders were set outside the NHK. However, by the 1860s the stance had developed that secession from the NHK was mandatory. See Van Velzen in 2.7.2.4.

Scriptural truths according to importance. However, one should also take into account that Ethicals focused almost exclusively on *fides qua* at the expense of *fides quae*; for them, a truth was not a concept or object but an act or experience. It was this characterization of truth, in essence the result of anti-intellectualism, that distinguished Ethicalism from the Modernist, Apologist and Juridical Calvinist schools. This different view of “truth” implied that the details that Gunning considered “inviolable” in Scripture were not necessarily those that Calvinists considered inviolable.

The position that a school of thought held on the source and character of truth was determinative for how these schools viewed confessional writings. Modernists considered confessions to be articulations of reality based on scientific endeavours that could be overthrown at any moment. Apologists considered confessions articulations of reality based on historically reliable sources. Calvinists considered confessions articulations of reality based on divine, infallible revelation. Ethicals considered confessions articulations of experience based on the work of the one Spirit. For the sake of completeness, it should be noted that Evangelicals (Groningers) considered confessions articulations of personal experience that could vary drastically from individual to individual. In theory, Apologists, Calvinists, and Ethicals defended the authority of confessions while Modernists and Evangelicals denied it. That Ethicals failed to defend confessional authority in practice had more to do with the situation within the NHK.

2.8.3.8 CONCLUSION

During the 1860s, reflection on confessional subscription had become a mind-boggling maze of varying points of view. On some points, various schools would agree. For example, Evangelicals and Ethicals agreed on what to do with the NHK in its current state, and Apologists and Juridical Calvinists agreed on the form that subscription should take in the NHK. However, taking all factors into consideration, the parties can be clearly distinguished. As was noted, adherents of the various schools were not always aware of this. This lack of discernment led to unjustifiable combinations of schools of thought—for example, Gunning’s sketch of the conservative and orthodox camp. It also meant that besides the positions that were actually held, a number of caricatures—straw men in fact—played a role in the debate. Groen was aware of this, bemoaning the fact that liberals used Ethical caricatures of the Calvinist position to their own end. Much energy was spent, especially by Calvinists, in attempting to correct the misunderstandings of their opponents. Moreover, the issue continued to crystallize, and publicists, especially in the Juridical Calvinist camp, continued to nuance their position. This constant flux made it very difficult for the parties to understand each other, and sometimes even to understand themselves. There could be inconsistencies or incompleteness in a position (as Gunning admitted to Groen with regard to appealing to the conscience of a false teacher), or a position simply might not fit into the scheme within which the publicists thought (as was most likely the case with Groen).

The astute reader will have noticed that Traditional Calvinists and Evangelicals (Groningers) did not feature strongly in this analysis. The reason for this is that they wrote no substantial publications on confessional subscription during the 1860s. This does not mean, however, that both parties failed to play a role in reflection. As noted, the Evangelicals—with the emergence of the Modernist party considered to belong to the establishment of the NHK—continued to play a decisive role at synods. That Traditional Calvinists continued to be active is clear from the number of submissions from their camp presented to various synods, and the complaint to the church council of The Hague after Zaalberg’s Easter sermon in 1864. However, in neither camp can a development in their stance be discerned and, in absence of any substantial documents, they do not fall within the remit of this review.

2.8.4 CONCLUSION

The 1860s formed a decade of polemics. The various schools of thought battled to convince each other of the proper role that confessions should play within the NHK. Positions crystallized, and nuances within several schools of thought, particularly Juridical Calvinism, became apparent. In

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the meantime, successive synods continued to follow a course of non-action on the score of doctrine. During the late 1860s, the polemical flare-up had died down. However, the fire was still smouldering. During the 1870s and 1880s it would flare up again.

2.9 Indecision and Church Schism (1870s and 1880s)

Whereas reflection on confessional subscription during the 1860s occurred primarily in polemical debates, the public reflection shifted during the 1870s and 1880s back to the table of the synods in The Hague. With one exception, the various factions were well represented at synods, and since almost every faction had adherents occupying a professorial chair somewhere in the country, synod was constantly confronted with every possible position on confessional subscription. As a result, these two decades became a period of factionalism, leading to deadlocks and compromises. They culminated in the schism of 1886-1887 when a sizeable portion of the conservative camp broke away from the NHK.

Firstly, there is a review of the various factions within the NHK (2.9.1). Secondly, the course of events and major publications relating to the issue of confessional subscription is set out (2.9.2). There follows an analysis of reflection on confessional subscription during this period (2.9.3), closing with some concluding remarks (2.9.4).

2.9.1 THEOLOGICAL PERSUASIONS

Thus far, the various groupings within the NHK have been described as “theological currents.” This adequately describes the various groups during the early nineteenth century, though the Groningers might justifiably be called a proper school of thought. With the organization of various groups, especially in the course of the 1860s, it became more common for the Dutch to speak of the various *gezindtes* (persuasions) or *richtingen* (directions) in the church. Accordingly, the various groups within the NHK will now be treated as persuasions.

The number of persuasions that can be delineated depends on one’s own position, be it as contemporary or as historian or theologian. For example, Synod 1873 distinguished between three persuasions: “left,” “middle,” and “right,” which more or less correspond to “Modernist,” “Groninger,” and “Conservative.” This present study continues in line with previous classifications, classifying according to theological convictions and positions with respect to the NHK. Theologically, Modernists, Groninger-Evangelicals, Apologists, Ethicals, and Calvinists are to be distinguished. Within the Calvinist camp, the issue of reforming the NHK proved divisive, and thus are distinguished evangelical-confessionals, Juridical-confessionals, Seceders, and a newcomer: *Gereformeerden*.³⁸¹

2.9.1.1 MODERNISTS

Within Modernism there were primarily two currents, an intellectual current and an ethical current. The intellectual current subdivided into an ideal and empirical camp. The 1870s and 1880s were characterized by the struggle between the intellectual and ethical currents within Modernism, and are generally considered to be a low point of modernist theology in The Netherlands. At one stage, Modernists even feared for the survival of their theology, and it was not until 1890 that they regained hope. In 1870, Modernists organized themselves in the *Protestantenbond*. Its organ was called *De Hervorming*. The majority of the members of the *Protestantenbond* wanted to use it as a stepping-stone to the new church of the future, while a minority sought to enlist it in strengthening the anti-confessional front.

Modernism within the NHK was considerably weakened by an exodus of its adherents. In 1877, the brothers P. R. Hugenholtz and P. H. Hugenholtz (jr.), both ministers in Amsterdam, seceded from the NHK to establish the Free Congregation. Their call for others to follow their example fell on deaf ears. Many modernists, both ministers and church members, left the NHK for the Remonstrant brotherhood.

³⁸¹ In 1873 A. Kuyper listed six currents in the NHK: Ethical, Groninger, Modernist, Utrechtian (= Apologetic), Confessioneel (= my Juridical Calvinist), and Gereformeerd (Kuyper, *Confidentie*, 21).

In spite of its small size, Modernism was a force to be reckoned with in the NHK due to the disproportionately large number of professorial chairs it occupied. Prominent Modernists included professors J. H. Scholten, A. Kuenen, E. J. Diest Lorgion, and L. W. E. Rauwenhoff.³⁸²

A somewhat doubtful figure (Modernist or Groninger?) was Rev. J. Alingh Prins.³⁸³

2.9.1.2 GRONINGER-EVANGELICALS

By the 1860s, the Groningers were considered to be the central party in the NHK. Their ranks were split between more radical and more conservative Groningers, with the more radical Groningers frequently crossing over to the Modernist camp. The more conservative Groningers tended to work closely with the Ethicals, who themselves were becoming somewhat more liberal. During the course of the 1870s, the Groningers weakened as a separate persuasion. In 1872, *Waarheid in Liefde* ceased to be published, though *Geloof en Vrijheid* continued. In 1872, the last truly Groninger professor, Prof. P. Hofstede de Groot, retired and his place was taken by the Ethical D. Chantepie de la Saussaye. Because the persuasion was primarily known by its organ *Geloof en Vrijheid*, its adherents came to be commonly referred to as Evangelicals. To avoid confusion with today's evangelicals, they will be referred to as Groninger-Evangelicals hereafter.

The demise of the Groninger school of thought should not be taken to suggest that its influence on the whole was diminished. On the contrary, the ministerial associations continued to be controlled by Groninger-Evangelicals to a considerable degree. Moreover, many ministers serving the churches were trained in the Groninger-Evangelical tradition. At the synods during the 1870s and 1880s, the Groninger-Evangelical position was defended not only by Prof. P. Hofstede de Groot (present as professorial advisor or as elder) but also by Rev. S. K. Thoden van Velzen of Leeuwarden—dubbed the ‘*defensor fidei*’ of the Groninger Theology by Klooster.³⁸⁴

2.9.1.3 APOLOGISTS

Thus far, the Apologists have been classified as borderline conservative. Their methodology was liberal, but in essence they defended orthodox points of view. Their approach was not unlike that of Biblical Supernaturalists such as Heringa half a century earlier. During the course of the 1870s and 1880s, it became clear that their liberal methodology and their orthodox stances could not be synthesized. Van Oosterzee admitted as much at one stage when he declared that he felt more affinity towards Groninger-Evangelicals than Juridical Calvinists and especially the *Gereformeerden*. Doedes arrived at the point where he accepted the validity of the findings of the Tübingen School and himself began to practise Scripture criticism, although he always maintained the trustworthiness of Scripture. In 1880 he published a commentary on the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism in which he seriously undermined a number of doctrines, including those of the Trinity and infant baptism. Since Doedes was considered a conservative by his contemporaries (both liberal and conservative) his publications were used by liberals to undermine the conservative position on confessional subscription. Because Doedes and Van Oosterzee were both professors in Utrecht, the Apologist voice was heard at two of every three synods during the 1870s.

In 1882, Van Oosterzee passed away. His successor, the J. J. P. Valetton jr., (a Young Ethical, see below) at the start of academic exercises declared to his students that a new beginning would be

³⁸² In addition to literature noted in 2.7.1.2 see Aalders, *Ethisch*, 26-30.

³⁸³ Alingh Prins' close co-operation with Diest Lorgion and the fact that he came with quite radical proposals (see 2.9.2.1.2) would suggest he is best classified as a liberal. I have been able to find very little on Alingh Prins, which I consider remarkable since he must have been a minister of some influence. Klooster mentions him only three times in his dissertation. Vree pointed out to me that Alingh Prins was never present at meetings of the Groningers, never corresponded with Hofstede de Groot, and never published anything.

³⁸⁴ See the literature under 2.5.1 and 2.8.1. Rasker calls them a “*gematigde middenpartij*” (moderate party of the centre) (Rasker, *De NHK vanaf 1795*, 53). On Thoden van Velzen see Klooster, *Groninger Godgeleerdheid*, 236.

made. As Van Oosterzee passed into oblivion, the Apologist persuasion, to the extent that it existed as a separate school, was limited to the increasingly less orthodox Doedes. He retired from professorship in 1888 and passed away in 1897.³⁸⁵

2.9.1.4 ETHICALS (OLD AND YOUNG)

During the 1870s and 1880s, Ethicalism took on more the form of a persuasion, with many ministers feeling attracted to the ideas of Chantepie de la Saussaye and Gunning jr. These two fathers of Ethicalism saw their life work crowned with professorial appointments. Chantepie de la Saussaye filled the chair vacated by P. Hofstede de Groot in Groningen in 1872. He occupied it for only two years, passing away in 1874. Gunning jr. was appointed professor in Amsterdam³⁸⁶ in 1882, and in 1889 was granted a professorial chair in Leiden, where he served until his retirement in 1899. Both Chantepie de la Saussaye and Gunning served synods as advisors.

During this period a new generation of Ethicals arose, referred to in the literature as the Later or Young Ethicals. Prominent among them were J. J. P. Valetton jr. and P. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, the latter a son of D. Chantepie de la Saussaye. Their theology was less orthodox than that of the earlier Ethicals, but ethical nonetheless because it proceeded from the principle that God's truth is ethical, implying that it directs itself primarily at the heart rather than the mind. There were no pertinent publications from Young Ethicals on the matter of confessional subscription from these two decades.³⁸⁷

2.9.1.5 JURIDICAL CALVINISTS WITHIN THE NHK

For Juridical Calvinists, the 1870s and 1880s mark the period in which the battle was taken over by a new generation. G. Groen van Prinsterer, who had declined chairmanship of the CV on account of ill health, passed away in 1876. In his wake two new leaders arose: Rev. J. J. van Toorenenbergen (awarded a doctorate in 1878) and Rev. Dr. A. Kuyper. These two conservatives personified the two emphases found with Groen van Prinsterer. Van Toorenenbergen was more medically inclined whereas Kuyper was more juridically inclined. Between these two poles was found the Juridical Calvinist camp. Generally a distinction is made between three groups:

- (a) the Evangelical-Confessionals, who emphasized the gospel over and above the confessions, moderately criticised the confessions, and favoured a more medical path to reforming the NHK;
- (b) the Juridical-Confessionals, who emphasized the importance of both the gospel and the confessions, tended to uphold the Three Forms of Unity as a whole, and favoured the juridical path to reforming the NHK though they felt the time was not yet ripe for this; and
- (c) the *Gereformeerden*, who emphasized the importance of both the gospel and the confessions, were strict adherents to the Three Forms of Unity, and favoured the juridical path to reforming the NHK, being prepared to force the issue to a resolution.

During the 1870s the various factions within the Juridical Calvinist camp debated the issue of confessional subscription among themselves. During the 1880s the issue took a practical turn when the church of Amsterdam forced the issue by refusing to co-operate in admission of persons with Modernist faith convictions to membership of the NHK. This finally led to a church schism in 1886-87 when many *Gereformeerden* left the NHK to form the association of *Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Kerken* (NDGK—Nether-Dutch Reformed Churches), adopting CO-1619 (and thus FS-1619). Those *Gereformeerden* who did not leave the NHK continued to operate as a

³⁸⁵ For literature see 2.7.1.3.

³⁸⁶ During the late 1876 the Dutch government abandoned its "three university" policy. As a result the City Atheneum in Amsterdam became the City University of Amsterdam, the fourth public university in The Netherlands with a theological faculty.

³⁸⁷ For literature see 2.7.1.4.

separate flank within the Juridical Calvinist camp; their position was initially defended primarily by Prof. P. J. Hoedemaker and Rev. G. J. Vos, both of Amsterdam.³⁸⁸

2.9.1.6 JURIDICAL CALVINISTS OUTSIDE THE NHK

There were no developments in church organization during the 1870s and 1880s in the various circles that had their origin with the Secession. Of the three largest groups—the CGKN, *Kruisgezinden* and Ledeboerianen—only the CGKN were organized into an association of churches.³⁸⁹

2.9.2 EVENTS AND PUBLICATIONS

During the 1870s and 1880s, reflection on confessional subscription primarily took place within the confines of the institutions within the NHK. Compared with the 1860s, there were very few publications on the issue. However, it is not possible in a study of this kind to trace all the discussions at the various levels of the NHK administration. Even limiting the matter to the debates at the synods is a considerable task, thus for the course of the 1870s and 1880s the acts of synod have mainly been considered. Furthermore, this period can be characterized not as one of development in reflection on confessional subscription but rather as repeated attempts to apply the theory developed in previous years to the given situation. In view of the fact that most parties (the stricter Juridical Calvinists and Seceders excepted) were represented at synodical level, it is interesting to see how the various factions set about this task and to marvel at how long it took before the bubble finally burst.

The synodical course of events between 1870 and 1887 will be reviewed first (2.9.2.1). The primary concern in this subsection will be to describe what successive synods decided and, if necessary, how these decisions came about. The following subsection draws on the acts of these same synods in order to present a brief overview of the positions of the various factions (2.9.2.2) and key publications from the various factions relevant to this present study (2.9.2.3-6). A brief overview of the events surrounding the church-schism of 1886-1887 known as the Doleantie (2.9.2.7) is then presented, and the section closes with a review of the position of the *Gereformeerde* Prof. P. J. Hoedemaker, who, more or less at the last minute, refused to join the *Gereformeerden* in their secession and wrote apologies for his position in the period that followed the Doleantie (2.9.2.8).

2.9.2.1 SYNODICAL AFFAIRS: COURSE OF EVENTS

As the divergence between and within the two main camps in the NHK increased, it was unavoidable that the issue of doctrinal binding would have to be addressed at synodical level if the unity of the NHK was to be preserved. In 1870, Pandora's Box was opened with a simple remark from a member of synod concerning the regulation of the presence of elders at the admission of new members. Almost every synod, both ordinary and extraordinary, held between 1870 and 1887 was confronted with matters related to doctrinal freedom.³⁹⁰

The deliberations and decisions on doctrinal binding between 1870 and 1887 were confusing and convoluted for a number of reasons. First of all, synod only discussed an issue if it had been placed on its agenda. Such an issue could be placed on its agenda as result of a previous synod's decision

³⁸⁸ On the relationship between the *Gereformeerden* (*Calvinisten*) and the Réveil see Augustijn and Vree, *Kuyper*, 54-85.

³⁸⁹ With thanks to M. te Velde for point this out to me.

³⁹⁰ During the 1870s and 1880s a large number of extraordinary synods were held. These synods were usually held in the spring of a year and seemed to have functioned as independent synods, though the members of these synods were identical to those of the foregoing summer. The extraordinary synod of 1872 is the only synod that did not deal with matters related to doctrinal liberty. Note that the synod held in early 1874 is in fact the last session of Synod 1873 and is therefore not referred to as an extraordinary synod but "prolonged synod 1873." In the acts it is sometimes referred to as Synod 1874 and sometimes as Synod 1873.

for further action, by an ecclesiastical association (and even individual persons), or by a member of synod. If synod had decided to undertake no action on a specific issue, there was no guarantee that the issue would return to synod's table in the following year. As a result decisions were very much *ad hoc*.

Secondly, the issue of doctrinal binding itself was not the issue discussed by the synods. It happened to be the underlying factor in four separate issues, namely:

1. The stipulations outlined in RG artt. 38-39(40) on the admission of new members;
2. The existence and phrasing of AR art. 11 on the duty of members of church boards;
3. The existence and phrasing of REX art. 27 and RG art. 19, i.e. the forms of subscription;
and
4. The existence of persuasional minorities in local churches and the NHK.

Administratively, these were very different issues, and thus synods attempted to discuss them separately. At times it became clear that this was impossible, and a decision on one issue might be made dependent on a decision taken with respect to another issue. Furthermore, given the complex bureaucratic processes in place during these decades, it is not surprising that even synod members at times lost track of what was going on and what had been decided. It happened on occasion that a decision had been made but the whole discussion was re-opened several sessions later because a majority of members realized that the decision taken was not quite what they thought had been decided.

Thirdly, synods were often almost evenly divided on many of these issues. Tied votes became a regular phenomenon, and decisions relating to doctrinal binding were often taken with the slimmest of margins. One year a synod could swing in one direction and the following year it could swing the other. The position of the NHK's leading administrative body had become very unpredictable.

Fourthly, to give effect to decisions, synod was compelled to involve the provincial boards and the classical associations. The classical associations in particular tended to be more conservative than the synods. In addition, the provincial boards were very sharp in determining whether a particular decision was operable. As a result, synodical decisions almost never made it to a status of enforced regulations. On the odd occasion that they did, there was so much opposition from the church councils that non-compliance with newly enforced regulations—one might term it ecclesiastical disobedience—formed a problem all on its own.

The foregoing explains why synods during the 1870s and 1880s were all over the place when it came to confessional subscription.

It is no easy task to give a coherent and precise overview of these discussions. One could present a topical overview of this period. This has the advantage of presenting a coherent account concerning a particular issue, and was the approach chosen by Volger.³⁹¹ The major disadvantage of this approach is that one loses sight of the interconnectedness of these discussions.³⁹² To overcome this disadvantage one can take the chronological approach. However, if this is done in detail, the reader will end up as confused as many synod members were during those years.

A brief overview is now given of the most important events that determined the course followed by the NHK over roughly twenty years. This will be addressed topically, looking at reflection and

³⁹¹ Volger, *Vrijheid*, 220-240 discusses issues 2 and 3, 241-302 issue 1 (aspect: position of elders), 303-327 issue 4 (local), 328-344 issue 1 (aspect: the questions asked) and 345-378 issue 4 (national). For the first half of the nineteenth century Volger provides a more detailed backdrop to the history I have described. Midway his second volume, however, Volger all but leaves off describing the history of the NHK in general to concentrate on the course of events in Amsterdam.

³⁹² For example, Volger never makes clear that the discussions on the position of elders at the admission of members initiated the discussion on the questions asked at profession of faith. Even Synod considered the issue one and had the same advisory committee report on both issues simultaneously. In 1873/74 Synod had one committee advise on all four issues and in 1886 issues 1 and 3 are intrinsically linked.

decisions on each of the four issues separately for the two decades covered by this subsection. In the conclusion there will be some brief comments on the interconnectedness of the issues. In the following subsection, material from the acts will be utilized to try to come to grips with the positions of the various factions on confessional subscription in order to see to what extent new factors played a role or reflection advanced.³⁹³

2.9.2.1.1 The Admission of New Members³⁹⁴

Before persons could become members with full rights and privileges in the NHK they had to be examined. This process of examination was regulated in RG artt. 38 and 39. Since inception, RG art. 39 had remained unchanged (see 2.7.2.1.3). RG art. 38, however, had been expanded during the 1860s and now read:

The church council has jurisdiction over the admittance of members.

No one resident in another congregation is accepted and confirmed as member unless he first has submitted a proper attestation of moral conduct, issued by the church council of his congregation. Once the admittance and confirmation has taken place, the church council where it has taken place shall report this in writing to the church council of the congregation in the place of residence, in order that the admitted and confirmed member might be recorded as such in the membership-list of this congregation.

Prior to the admittance of a member there will be an examination of the gained knowledge of the Christian doctrine of faith and ethics, biblical and church history, especially that of the reformation; should this knowledge be considered sufficient, it is followed by a profession of faith by the candidates. The various actions take place by a teacher, assisted by one or more elders.

Other regulations mandated that the confirmation of members take place in a worship service. This meant that the questions of RG art. 39 were actually asked during a worship service.

Problems arose after 1867 when conservatives became increasingly dominant in church councils as elders and deacons. This created much tension between elders and ministers when persons were examined with respect to their faith. Conservative elders often had objections to the confession of faith of liberal candidate members, whereas the ministers who had catechized them were often liberal themselves and thus had no objections.

There might not have been a problem had the duties of ministers and elders with respect to admission been clearly regulated. However, they were not. In 1870, Prof. J. J. Prins of Leiden (orthodox but belonging to no particular persuasion) pointed out a discrepancy between RG art. 38 and SRK art. 21 on the role of elders during the examination and admission of candidate members of the NHK. SRK art. 21 stated that examination and admission were to take place “in the presence of elders,” RG art. 38 that it was to be “with the assistance of elders”. Basically, the question was whether elders were mere figureheads or actively involved in the examination process? Synod 1870 proved divided on the issue and passed the matter on to the ASC to present a proposal at Synod 1871. At Synod 1871 a second discrepancy was noted, this time between RG art. 38 and RG art. 39. RG 38 was understood to require an examination of *fides qua*, not *fides quae*, while the questions found in RG 39 were so dogmatic that (it was argued) they by their very nature concerned *fides quae*.

The synods of 1871 through 1876 were continually divided over the issue of admission. In general, successive synods tried to increase the power of the minister over that of the elder. Attempts to remove the doctrinal (confessional) character of admission—the most concerted effort was made in 1875 when 388 liberal ministers requested this—failed because AR art. 11 continued

³⁹³ For a proper understanding of the course of events it is necessary to be aware of the procedures and structures in place. I refer the reader to the excursus 2.7.2.1.2a.

³⁹⁴ See Van Grieken, *Leervrijheid*, 75-109 (covers period 1816-1928).

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to stipulate that the doctrine of the Christian Church and the NHK had to be maintained. On the other hand, attempts to strengthen the confessional character of admission also failed. Provisionally-adopted articles of the regulations often floundered when considered by provincial church boards and the classical associations. The seventy-odd provincial church board members were as divided as synod, such that a majority vote was often only by the slimmest of margins. The classical associations tended to be more conservative, and a majority of them almost always advised against confirming the provisionally-adopted texts. In 1876 it became clear that synod had reached an impasse when every motion, liberal or conservative, failed to gain majority support at synod, and discussion literally ground to a halt.

Though the regulations had almost remained the same between 1870 and 1877, their context had changed. Church members had become aware of the inconsistencies and began to use them to their advantage. Elders blocked admissions simply by being absent when they suspected liberal candidate members would be examined. This in turn meant that liberal candidate members began to make use of RG art. 38.2, which granted them the right to be admitted in a congregation other than their own. This resulted in all sorts of mayhem, and lower church boards repeatedly asked higher church boards for advice. But no one was willing to handle this hot potato, and even the ASC claimed to be incompetent to answer certain questions. The five-member advisory committee at Synod 1877 submitted three different proposals. Eventually, a liberal regulation was adopted (part of which was moving RG art. 38.2 to its own article, RG art. 40). In 1878, the texts were slightly modified in favour of the conservative position, and in 1879, by the slimmest of margins, RG artt. 38 and 40 became law. Conservative churches were suddenly faced with a host of problems, and many indicated they would not, under any circumstances, comply with RG art. 38. They even claimed that RG art. 38 undermined the duty of the church board members to maintain the doctrine of the Christian Church and the NHK as stipulated in AR art. 11. The advisory committee of Synod 1879 considered the situation to be a crisis of a magnitude that had not been experienced since 1816. Synod 1879 stuck to its guns and the liberal version of admission was maintained. Ministers were granted the sole right to admit members, church councils were warned to comply with the regulations, and it was made clear that only *knowledge* in keeping with the capabilities of the candidate, and not *faith convictions*, formed the criterion for admission.

The advisory committee on this issue made a rather telling statement in 1879. Its report reads:

Should our NHK become a confessional church as the confessionals understand it, or remain a department of the Protestant church, in which there is continual protest against every prescribed confession of faith, in which one is not allowed to know and does not want to know of any authority other than of God and the conscience, in which no one ought to or wants to tolerate, that someone or something should place itself between these two, in which the free thought and the free word alone may cultivate piety?³⁹⁵

The two verbs in this sentence are particularly telling. In using the terms “become” and “remain” the committee admitted what had long been suspected: the NHK was no longer the association of Reformed Churches as intended by GS Dordrecht 1618-19. In 1619, the NHK had wanted to be a “confessional church” with binding confessional statements. It is debatable whether the whole NHK throughout the Netherlands ever became such. In 1816, the NHK suited its church government to the practice. However, in 1816 and later years it was denied that the NHK had ceased to be a confessional church. But in 1879 an advisory committee of synod was able to speak of the NHK possibly “becoming” a confessional church as the confessionals understand it (i.e., in line with 1619), thus openly implying it was not such, and described the present NHK in terms of the liberal view of Protestantism.

³⁹⁵ *Handelingen...NHK... 1879:256.*

After 1879 the debate on admission continued, with conservatives attempting to increase the influence of elders and strengthen the confessional character of admission, and liberals attempting to increase the influence of ministers and weaken the confessional character of admission. Conservative congregations refused to act in accordance with RG artt. 38-40 and continuously petitioned synods to return to the pre-1879 versions. Liberals, on the other hand, continued to object to the confessional character of RG art. 39 and wanted further changes. Successive synods, however, would not be moved on the issue and maintained the *status quo*.

Synod 1885 was confronted with a new problem. If candidates wanted to be examined by a minister of another church they needed an attestation of moral conduct. The church of Amsterdam had made it impossible for six candidates to be admitted by a liberal minister in a neighbouring church by refusing to issue the necessary attestations, and many other conservative churches were contemplating following this example. While the matter was investigated, it became clear that non-compliance with RG artt. 38-40 was widespread. In an attempt to legitimize this actual state, Extraordinary Synod 1886 decided that churches could choose to abide by either the pre or the post-1880 versions of RG artt. 38-39. The situation had clearly reached a total deadlock.

In the summer of 1886 the ordinary synod decided that granting churches a choice between which articles to abide by to be an anomaly. It therefore overruled the decision of the extraordinary synod and subsequently adopted a more liberal version of RG art. 38 coupled with the old (conservative) version of RG art. 39. This combination of articles was confirmed in 1887. In 1888, these two issues did not return to synod's table, nor did they in subsequent years. This is probably to be explained by the fact that by 1888 the majority of churches that refused to comply with the liberal procedures surrounding admission had broken with the NHK (see 2.9.2.7).

2.9.2.1.2 The Duty of Church Board Members (AR-1852 art. 11)

AR-1852 art. 11, like its predecessor AR-1816 art. 9, stipulated that among others things, the task of church board members was to "maintain the doctrine of the Christian Church and the NHK." Attempts by Groningers and Modernists to have this line removed from the regulations when they were revised during the 1840s and 1850s had failed. During the course of the 1870s the issue was raised anew.

In 1872, the Modernist Prof. E. J. Diest Lorgion of Groningen moved that all references to doctrine be removed from the regulations. The three member advisory committee was divided over the issue, and the Modernist Prof. J. H. Scholten of Leiden advised replacing the phrase "maintenance of their doctrine" with "the care for the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ." Though the vote was initially tied over the matter, the following day this motion carried.

There was much opposition to this change from within the churches, motivated partly by fear of unrest and partly the conviction that a synod was incompetent to take such a decision. The synod, advised thereto by the Ethical Prof. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye of Groningen, decided to leave AR art. 11 intact until after the report of the Committee of Nine had been considered.³⁹⁶ In early 1874 there was heated debate on the issue but AR art. 11 remained unchanged. In the summer of 1874, the discussion on AR art. 11 re-opened in full. Prof. J. I. Doedes of Utrecht moved that the synod adopt a statement that maintenance of doctrine was the main goal of all church board members in the NHK; it was rejected with only one vote in favour. Rev. J. Alingh Prins of Kortezwaag proposed an entirely new text for AR art. 11. It was provisionally adopted with a vote of 11-4. In translation it read:

The doctrine, found in the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of the Synod of Dordrecht comprise the historical foundation of the *Nederlandsche Hervormde Kerk*.

³⁹⁶ On the Committee of Nine see 2.9.2.1.4.

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As this doctrine is not confessed with sufficient agreement by the congregation, one cannot, in the present circumstances, speak of “maintenance of their doctrine” in a church political sense.

The congregation, continuing to build on the principles of the Church, as they are apparent in its origin and its development, continues to confess its Christian faith and bring this to expression, which shall once again be a sufficiently unanimous confession of the Church.

In the meantime the care for the concerns, of both the Christian Church in general as of the *Hervormde* specifically, the cultivation of Christian religion and morality, the increase of religious knowledge, the preservation of order and harmony, the furtherance of love for King and Fatherland, shall always be the main goal of all, who have been charged with any form of ecclesiastical management, though no one can be rejected as member or teacher who, when answering to the other requirements, conscientiously declares to be convinced that he, in concurrence with the principles noted above, is allowed to belong to the *Nederlandsche Hervormde Kerk*.

In 1875 the objections to this decision were of such a nature that reporting them takes up a tenth of the acts.³⁹⁷ Most objections were motivated by the thought that the new article read more like an apology than a piece of legislation. After much debate and the consideration of various proposals, Synod 1875 decided 15-4 to leave AR art. 11 unchanged.

Subsequent to this, AR art. 11 remained unchanged. In 1879, a proposal to change “doctrine” into “principles” was defeated 11-8. In 1883, it was suggested that, in view of the newly adopted FS-1883, the phrase “maintenance of their doctrine” should be removed from AR art. 11. Synod unanimously decided not to accede to this request. In 1887, another attempt to have the phrase removed was again unanimously dismissed, and it would seem from the acts that the synod did not even discuss or vote on the issue.

Neither the liberals nor the conservatives were helped by a change to AR art. 11. For conservatives, changing AR art. 11 was tantamount to changing the character of the NHK. For moderates and liberals, changing AR art. 11 caused such upheaval that it was simply not worth the trouble. This, it seems, explains the curt dismissals of the issue in 1879, 1883 and 1887.

2.9.2.1.3 The Forms of Subscription (REX 28 and RG 19)³⁹⁸

In 1855 FS-1852 came into force; for ministers it was regulated in REX art. 27 (see 2.7.2.1.3), for religious instructors in RG 19. In spite of the vehement attacks it endured during its introduction, it had survived unscathed through the 1860s. In the course of the 1870s this changed drastically.

Because there were only three universities in The Netherlands with theological faculties educating candidates for the ministry, only three provincial boards in fact examined ministerial candidates. In 1870 attempts were made to change this, resulting in a decision to overhaul the whole REX. Thus Synod 1872 was also forced to reconsider REX art. 27. The ASC advised synod not to change FS-1852, fearing unrest in the church. However, the Modernist Prof. E. J. Diest Lorgion of Groningen had suggested removing all references to doctrine from the regulations. He succeeded in this with respect to AR art. 11. In line with his proposal, Rev. J. Alingh Prins of Kortezwaag proposed a radically different form of subscription. It was, however, defeated. The Modernist Prof. J. H. Scholten of Leiden proposed a new, less dogmatic form that was provisionally adopted. In 1873 it became clear that the majority of provincial boards and classical associations were opposed to changing the form, and thus FS-1852 was left intact. A motion to change FS-1852 at Prolonged Synod 1873 also did not carry.

³⁹⁷ Advisory committees tended to collate all the responses from the churches in their reports, which were published in full in the acts.

³⁹⁸ See Van Grieken, *Leervrijheid*, 65-75 (covers period 1816-1928).

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In 1877 the form was discussed again when the Modernists Prof. A. Kuenen of Leiden and Rev. J. J. L. Luti, Walloon minister in Middelburg, proposed amending REX art. 27 and RG art. 19. The Apologist Prof. J. I. Doedes of Utrecht strongly objected. Synod decided 13-6 not to change FS-1852. In 1878 and 1879 renewed attempts by the liberals to have FS-1852 changed failed.

In 1880 CA Hoorn requested the synod to reconsider the proposal of 1872. The five member advisory committee was divided over the issue. Its report is important; besides giving an overview of reflection on FS-1852 between 1872 and 1879, it contained the following telling lines:

Limit subscription to the spirit, the essence, the principles or whatever it is to be called, of Christianity and Protestantism or, if this is preferred, let all that is asked be co-operation in the flourishing of God's Kingdom in general and the *Hervormde Kerk* in particular. History and experience have taught us, and it is rooted in the nature of the matter, that as soon as we enter the area of doctrine and concurrence is considered necessary, the unity of spirit is broken and the freedom of conscience is repressed. Hence the Church should not busy itself with the regulation and judgement of dogmatic disputes which are to be decided by science and free research, but should have faith in the spirit of truth and love, which will triumph in this struggle increasingly over one-sidedness; it should ensure, that no serious, upright, truth-loving Christian mind be excluded because of his faith conviction and be curtailed in his Christian privileges.³⁹⁹

The synod debated the issue hotly and decided to change FS-1852, adopting an amended version of the Kuenen-Luti proposal of 1877.⁴⁰⁰ The provincial boards were evenly divided over the issue, while two-thirds of the classical associations were against. Synod 1881 reconsidered the matter and provisionally adopted the Alingh Prins proposal of 1878. A very slight majority of provincial board members was against this proposal, as were the majority of classical associations. Nevertheless, the synod confirmed this text after having slightly amended it. In 1883 the ASC reported that the vote among provincial board members had been 35 against and 35 in favour. In accordance with the rules, which stipulated that a majority must be against a decision for it to be vetoed, the ASC had the new form enforced as of January 15, 1883. FS-1883 was the third form of subscription enforced in the NHK since 1816.⁴⁰¹

Every reference to confessions or even doctrine had now disappeared. All that was left was "the interests of the Kingdom of God", and in line with these, the interests of the NHK. Doctrinal liberty had been legalized.

Synod 1883 confirmed the correctness of the ASC's action with a vote of 8-7 (the 4 members of synod who were also members of the ASC abstained). Nevertheless, this course of events sparked off a heated discussion during the synod. The acts summarize the liberal position as follows:

Dogmatism has always been the curse of the church, for then people began to think that the main substance of Christianity is to be found in certain formulae and began to bind the consciences of Christians to these. Unity was the aim of this endeavour, but in vain; for true unity is that of the spirit, which Jesus made characteristic of his true disciples, of the spirit of truth, purity and love.

The acts report the conservative position as follows:

Every church must have a confession, which is not a dry dogmatic formula, but the expression of the inner soul and communion with God. For church and person alike this is the highest, the most holy good. The NHK has such a confession, one which has never been rejected or replaced. Every minister of the Gospel in the NHK is obliged to maintain that

³⁹⁹ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1880:309.

⁴⁰⁰ It should be noted that this decision was taken during the last session of synod with a vote of 9-5, implying five synod members were absent.

⁴⁰¹ *Handelingen...NHK...* 1882:166, 187.

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confession according to God's Word. To request him to promise this upon entry to the teaching office in the church is fitting and in no way superfluous.⁴⁰²

The final outcome of this discussion seems to have been determined by circumstance. Debate centred on a proposal to rescind FS-1883 and re-introduce FS-1852. The first time this matter was put to the vote, the vote tied 9-9, one synod member being absent. The next day the matter was again put to the vote. It appears that the absence of a second synod member meant the conservatives outvoted the liberals 9-8. Synod 1883 thus provisionally adopted FS-1852 and rescinded FS-1883.

In the past, liberals had been content with FS-1852 because it could be interpreted in a sense comparable to FS-1883. With the adoption of FS-1883, the liberals had reached their objective. They were afraid, however, that returning to FS-1852 implied rejection of the ideas articulated in FS-1883. To their way of thinking, FS-1852 re-adopted after the events of 1883 implied a stricter binding than that prior to 1883. Hence the

tide in the churches turned against the decision of Synod 1883. As a result, Synod 1884 decided 11-8 not to return to FS-1852.

The introduction of FS-1883 caused problems in PB Zuid-Holland, where it had been decided to demand subscription to FS-1883 and also to a declaration that contained the essence of FS-1852. The church of Berkenwoude protested against this measure. Synod Contracta 1884 ruled against PB Zuid Holland and Synod 1884 upheld this decision. In 1885 the synod again decided, this time 12-6, not to change FS-1883.

In 1886, however, the extraordinary synod decided to try a new tack. Candidates were given the option of either subscribing via FS-1852 or FS-1883. But in the summer of 1886 it became clear that this approach was not feasible. The ordinary synod of 1886 thus tried to resolve the problems by amending FS-1883. The final text was adopted unanimously. This text met with approval in the churches. Thus Synod 1887, barring a minor amendment, confirmed the new text for the form of subscription. The provincial board members voted 54-12 in favour of this new form and it was enforced on January 1, 1888. FS-1888 was the fourth form of subscription that functioned in the NHK since 1816.

FS-1883 had dropped all references to confessions and doctrine. In FS-1888 the concept returns to some extent in the reference to "the principles of the Hervormde Church." FS-1888 thus stands between FS-1852 and FS-1883 where it concerns the issue of doctrinal binding.

2.9.2.1.4 The Position of Persuasive Minorities⁴⁰³

Already early in the 1870s, members of synod and the church at large realized that the regulations on admission as members (RG art. 38-39), the maintenance of doctrine (AR art. 11),

NHK—FS-1883

We, the undersigned, admitted by the provincial church board of ..., (or by the Committee for the Walloon Churches) to the ministry of the Gospel in the Nederlandsche Hervormde Kerk, herewith promise, that we, in agreement with our calling, shall labour therein with diligence and faithfulness, and will in as far as we are able further the interests of God's Kingdom and in agreement herewith those of the Nederlandsche Hervormde Kerk in keeping with her ordinances.

NHK—FS-1888

We, the undersigned, admitted by the provincial church board of ..., (or by the Committee for the affairs of the Walloon Churches) to the public ministry of the Gospel in the Nederlandsche Hervormde Kerk, promise, deeply conscious of our calling and full of trust in God, that we shall labour therein with diligence and faithfulness, in agreement with the principles and character of the Hervormde Kerk in this country, in order to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and in as far as we are able to further the interests of God's Kingdom and in agreement herewith those of the Nederlandsche Hervormde Kerk, in keeping with her ordinances.

⁴⁰² *Handelingen...NHK...* 1883:202-203 (liberals) and 204 (conservatives).

⁴⁰³ See Van Grieken, *Leervrijheid*, 110-128.

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and the two forms of subscription (REX art. 27 and RG art. 19), were not the problem as such. What connected these three issues was the cohabitation of the various persuasions within the NHK. The regulations presumed that each municipality had its own NHK congregation. Thus membership of a particular church was not determined by one's persuasional taste but by one's place of residence. This created all sorts of problems. In smaller churches, NHK members of all persuasions were forced to church together. Those who refused either worshiped with Seceders (without changing membership) or formed '*evangelisaties*' (preaching points) that eventually became new congregations. In larger churches, liberal and conservative ministers served alongside each other but with the democratization of election procedures, conservatives were becoming more prominent in church councils. Thus in all congregations there was the tendency for the majority (generally the more conservative) to overrule the minority (especially the Modernists).

In 1873, urged thereto by the ASC, the synod decided to look seriously into the re-organization of the NHK along persuasional rather than geographical lines. In attendance at this synod as professorial advisors were the Modernist A. Kuenen of Leiden, the Apologist J. J. van Oosterzee of Utrecht, and the Ethical D. Chantepie de la Saussaye of Groningen. It is interesting to note their ideas and solutions. Kuenen suggested that a *modus vivendi* should be created to protect Modernists from conservative attacks. Van Oosterzee considered inaccurate the characterization of the NHK as consisting of just two camps; the situation was more complex, and thus would not be easily solved. Chantepie de la Saussaye advised the synod to maintain the *status quo*. In the end the synod decided that a serious attempt should be made at restructuring the NHK. It unanimously adopted a letter drafted by Prof. Kuenen containing the following paragraph:

However, Synod has not become so concerned by the general dissatisfaction with the present organisation of the government of the church as it has by the vehement struggle of the persuasions in the *Hervormde Kerk*. On account of the generally known proposals of Synod 1872 to change regulations regarding the doctrine of the confession, this struggle has in its size and principle nature become even more public than before. The fear for schism or the disintegration of the Church is in no way exaggerated. The tension is so high, that the least impulse can be enough to make this threatening danger sad reality. The fuel is stacked high, one spark will cause it to erupt in flames.⁴⁰⁴

The synod decided there were basically three factions in the NHK, which it typified as "right," "middle," and "left". It appointed a committee of nine persons: two ministers and one layman from each faction.⁴⁰⁵ The Committee of Nine was unable to reach a consensus or even a compromise. In fact, the Modernists were not even able to agree among themselves. Thus Prolonged Synod 1873, meeting in early 1874, was confronted with four separate proposals. After lengthy deliberations, a new set of regulations for the calling of ministers and appointment of elders and deacons was provisionally adopted. However, in 1874 and again in 1875 these attempts to regulate the situation were vetoed by the provincial board members.

The matter re-surfaced in 1878, and new attempts were made to resolve the matter. This lasted until 1883, when all proposals had been tried and voted down. Thus in 1884 the synod was again back at square one. A heated debate ensued, towards the end of which the Ethical Prof. J. H. Gunning jr., present as advisor, moved the following:

The General Synod of the NHK utters the desire that everything which relates to the confession and the pure spiritual concerns of the congregation, in the future be left to the congregations themselves, ruled by their lawful leaders.

⁴⁰⁴ *Handelingen...NHK... 1873:146-147.*

⁴⁰⁵ From the "right:" J. J. van Toorenenbergen; C. Th. Baron van Lynden van Sandenburg; J. Cramer. From the "middle:" T. J. van Griethuysen; H. O. Feith; W. Francken; From the "left:" P. R. Hugenholtz; F. J. J. A. Junius; H. Ph. de Kanter.

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On account of this she invites the provincial boards and the classical associations of the *Hervormde Kerk* to submit considerations and advice next year with respect to the desirability of the herewith referred to reorganization as well as the principle according to which these, and the manner in which these are to be implemented.⁴⁰⁶

The synod passed the motion 14-5, and a course was set for granting local churches spiritual autonomy.

This attempt fared worse than previous attempts: all provincial boards and almost all classical associations expressed outright disapproval of this measure. New proposals in 1885, 1886, and 1887 also failed to receive approval. The NHK was in a proper quandary.

Although this study does not consider it further, the saga was far from over. Persuasive reorganization would be a recurring headache for successive synods right up until the adoption of a new church order in 1951.

Synods were clearly unable to come up with a solution to the persuasive tensions within the NHK. A factor that prevented an acceptable solution was that conservatives felt the church must maintain its doctrine whereas liberals were opposed to the maintenance of any specific doctrine. Persuasive cohabitation was the problem behind discussions on RG artt. 38-40, AR art. 11, and forms of subscription. But behind the issue of persuasive cohabitation lay the problem of doctrinal binding.

2.9.2.1.5 Closing Comments

Four issues closely connected with the matter of confessional subscription were heavily debated by successive synods during the 1870s and 1880s: the admission of members to the NHK as regulated in RG artt. 38-39, the maintenance of doctrine as regulated in AR art. 11, the forms of subscription as regulated in REX art. 27 and RG art. 19, and the re-organization of the NHK to enable peaceful cohabitation of the various theological persuasions. The battle over the admission of new members eventually meant that ministers and candidates played the pivotal role, so that membership to the NHK was open to anyone who desired to be a member, regardless of their faith convictions. On the other hand, AR art. 11 remained unchanged, and after 1875 synods categorically refused to consider changes to it. In 1883 and again in 1888, new forms of subscription were introduced that tried to steer a middle course between the liberal and conservative positions, though the liberal flavour had become stronger than with FS-1816 or FS-1852. Attempts to resolve the persuasive struggle by creating a scheme of cohabitation failed repeatedly as provincial boards and classical associations rejected every solution proposed by the synods.

To what extent is this history helpful for this present study? The answer to this question is directly related to the reason why synods so frequently failed to resolve the problems they were facing. The real problem synods were faced with was the role that doctrine should play in the church. Can groups of people with different doctrinal convictions cohabit in the one church? What is the task of the leaders in the church? To what should office bearers and functionaries of the church promise allegiance? What are the prerequisites for membership of the church? During the first half of the nineteenth century synods had pleaded incompetence to deal with these issues. They were doctrinal issues, and synod's task was only to *manage* or *administer* the NHK. However, because the problems persisted and threatened to cause the NHK to disintegrate, synods were forced to deal with the issues. While doing so, synods concertedly attempted to steer clear of doctrinal decisions and tried to resolve all the problems by amending the regulations. They continued on the course mapped out in 1816: they tried merely to fill an administrative role. As such, decisions of successive synods are not of much use in coming to a conclusion on the

⁴⁰⁶ Note that this has been indexed in the acts simply as "the desire of synod" ("*wens der synode*"), on account of which it is quickly overlooked by one searching for matters on "doctrinal liberty" in the NHK.

principles of doctrinal binding. Because synods generally considered themselves incompetent to decide on this issue and refused to be drawn into this discussion, any hints of principles one might discern in its decisions were, from a synodical point of view, unintentional. Moreover, because synodical decisions were primarily a matter of compromise, the succession of decisions need not have coherence either.

Notwithstanding, the acts of synod supply a wealth of well-argued positions regarding the principles of doctrinal binding. For a start, the detailed advisory reports present a reasonable picture of the way in which church leaders throughout the country thought on the issue. Moreover, because the advisory reports were often small essays on the topic, and committees could consist of persons from any persuasion—there seems to have been no system in appointment—one is left with a good understanding of how prominent individuals thought. In addition, the meticulous minuting of the discussions provides ample material from which to distil premises and arguments that relate to the matter of doctrinal binding. Although it is true that such debates took place in a particular context, and positions could be modified as part of an attempt to break deadlocks, the synodical debates provide the researcher with material that can be of some benefit. It is such material that forms the substance for the next subsection.

2.9.2.2 SYNODICAL AFFAIRS: PERSUASIONAL POSITIONS AT SUCCESSIVE SYNODS

In 1873, synod considered there to be basically three parties within the NHK: a left party, a middle party, and a right party. This is understandable since synods were particularly concerned with administering the NHK in a situation of doctrinal plurality. There were effectively three practical positions with respect to the issue of doctrine: maintain the *status quo*, tighten doctrinal binding, and loosen doctrinal binding. For the present purposes, however, there can be seen to have been more nuances in play, and this present study is concerned not only with the practical outworking of a particular position, but also in the underlying motivations for such a position. In general, these did not really surface during discussions at synods; at least, they are rarely recorded in the acts and only occasionally does a well-argued stance appear in an advisory report. Nevertheless, some observations can be made on the matter based on the proceedings at successive synods.

In its factional composition, synods clearly did not reflect the membership of the NHK nor the lower church boards. The Modernists, although a minority at synods, were still overly represented. This was especially so because they occupied most professorial chairs in both Groningen and Leiden. Their stance was simple: a church is an institution for religious needs and has nothing to do with dogmatics. Members of the Modernist faction continually attempted to have references to doctrine removed from the regulations, or at least to have their faction granted the privilege of determining its own organization. Rev. J. Alingh Prins is proof thereof.

The Groninger-Evangelicals had become a centre party within the NHK. They repeatedly attempted to regulate the factual situation and thus maintain the *status quo*. For example, the Groninger-Evangelical section of the Committee of Nine suggested simply dividing the church along the three factional lines, and Rev. S. K. Thoden van Velzen of Leeuwarden repeatedly pleaded for what served the interests of the majority.

Apologists were frequently heard at synods though their influence to advise was limited. They repeatedly defended the confessional character of the church, and frequently fought a losing battle against Modernist attempts to liberalize the regulations.

The amount of support given to a course of inactivity would suggest that Ethicals were very much present at the synods. In 1873, D. Chantepie de la Saussaye made his debut at synod as professorial advisor, and was instrumental in holding off decisions. More interesting is the course taken by Synod 1884 when it followed the advice of Prof. J. H. Gunning jr. As early as the 1860s, Gunning had argued in favour of the doctrinal autonomy of the local congregation, and in 1884 his ideals were granted a trial run when the synod decided to ask the NHK at large to respond to Gunning's idea. This, however, was considered inappropriate by the churches.

One faction that was clearly under-represented at successive synods was the Calvinist camp. This was partly because this camp occupied no professorial chairs at the three state universities. The few representatives who were present were often the more medically minded Calvinists (for example, Rev. J. J. van Toorenenbergen and Rev. J. C. Verhoeff). In essence this meant that one of the factions within the NHK responsible for much of the uproar was never really part of the decision making process. Their view, except in the form of caricature, is never really present in the acts.

From the course of events at synodical level, it appears that there was indeed no real advancement in reflection on confessional subscription in this circle. The various factions were continually involved in applying their principles to the practical situation, and thus doing battle with each other. Politicking played an important role in the decision making process, and the desire to prevent unrest in the church was a more prominent factor than the principles from which the various factions operated.

Thus the course of events at synods between 1870 and 1888 are of little use when it comes to principles with respect to doctrinal binding. They do indicate, however, how far-reaching the implications of a stance on doctrinal binding can be.

2.9.2.3 MODERNIST: R. T. H. P. L. A. VAN BONEVAL FAURE

Synod 1874 had adopted a rather odd version of AR art. 11. It also decided to have the advisory committee's report published separately, and so it became a matter for public debate. Articles were written by persons with various leanings. In response to a confessional pamphlet on this issue,⁴⁰⁷ the Modernist R. T. H. P. L. A. van Boneval Faure, Walloon elder in Leiden and professor in Law, also wrote an article. In 1877, Van Boneval Faure wrote another publication that touched on the subject of this present study, concerning the questions asked during public profession of faith. These questions were a bane for the synods, and in 1876 discussion on this matter had come to a deadlock.

Both publications make clear that the Modernist position on confessional subscription was essentially a non-position. The idea of confessional subscription was considered Roman Catholic and therefore unbecoming for a Protestant church. Profession of faith is a matter of testifying to a particular attitude (i.e. *fides qua*), and scientific research is the only legitimate route to the truth, although *the* truth as such can never be known. Therefore, doctrinal freedom is a *sine qua non* for the Protestant church. It is clear that Modernists accepted no manner of confessional subscription.⁴⁰⁸

2.9.2.4 APOLOGETIC: J. J. VAN OOSTERZEE AND J. I. DOEDES

The Apologist position was represented in dogmatics written by J. J. van Oosterzee, published in three volumes between 1870 and 1872. It was translated into English and became popular in America.⁴⁰⁹ Van Oosterzee briefly dealt with the confessional question in volume two. He argued that a church cannot exist without confession. While there should be a large measure of freedom in a Protestant church, such freedom cannot be limitless.⁴¹⁰

In 1880, Doedes published a critical commentary of the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. In it he tried to indicate on which points the two confessions should be altered or augmented in the light of developments in theology since the sixteenth century. In this commentary he touches on the issue of confessional subscription in the introduction and also when discussing article 7 of the Belgic Confession on the sufficiency of Scripture.

⁴⁰⁷ Probably [Van Benthum], *Opmerkingen 1874*.

⁴⁰⁸ Van Boneval Faure, *Handhaving*. Van Boneval Faure, *Belijdenisvragen*.

⁴⁰⁹ *BLGNP*, 2:354.

⁴¹⁰ Van Oosterzee, *Dogmatiek*, 2:441-442.

Doedes especially pleaded for revision of the confessional documents of the church. He pointed out that while there was much criticism of these documents, they had remained unchanged since 1618-19. Doedes himself was not afraid to articulate his own criticism of the confessions. Thus with respect to article 7 of the Belgic Confession, he felt it improper to equate Holy Scripture with God's Word. To his way of thinking, one must subscribe a confession *quatenus*, and if one cannot do so, one must change the confession.⁴¹¹

These two publications from the leading figures of the Apologist School may be considered to be the crystallized and consolidated product of their ideas. Their rationalist methodology had begun to make inroads on their orthodoxy, and it is no longer appropriate to consider the Apologists simply as belonging to the conservative camp. However, their position with respect to the confessions remained conservative in its practical outworking.

2.9.2.5 EVANGELICAL-CONFESSIONAL: J. J. VAN TOORENENBERGEN

The Juridical Calvinist camp continued to represent a spectrum of views with respect to confessional subscription. The more medical wing of this camp was led by Rev. J. J. van Toorenenbergen of Rotterdam, in 1880 appointed professor in Amsterdam. It was noted above how he, a key figure in the creation of the ECPV, advocated the priority of the convincing power of the Gospel over the judicial right of the confession. During the 1870s and 1880s, Van Toorenenbergen continued to be an influential person within and on behalf of the confessional camp, giving speeches and writing a number of publications that antagonized the factions within the Juridical Calvinist camp. A few of these publications will now be considered to give an impression of his position on confessional subscription and related issues.

In 1868 Van Toorenenbergen spoke for the NHPV (the successor to the ECPV) on subscription by the professors of Leiden to the confession after the GS Dordrecht 1618-19. In 1869, the material of his speech, greatly augmented, was published in book form. The debate on the Leiden professors is somewhat far removed from this present study,⁴¹² the introduction in this publication is of relevance. In this introduction, Van Toorenenbergen discussed the confessional practice in the NHK between 1561 and 1619 with a view to finding the answer to the question how the confessions might function in the church of his day. He characterized the Belgic Confession as an apology and profession of faith, an expression of convictions. He considered the Catechism also to be an expression of the convictions in the heart, noting that it only gained confessional status after years of use in the churches as an instructional aid. Van Toorenenbergen described the Canons of Dort as a second class of Formulas, not truly symbolical (in this class he also placed the Walcheren Articles, the Consensus of Zurich, and the Consensus of Geneva): they are apocrypha, a broad explanation of certain points of doctrine that cannot always serve to unite all friends. Van Toorenenbergen then explained how the confessions between 1565 and 1619 were continually revised. In his opinion, they should be revised every three years, and the authority of the confessions temporarily suspended during the revision period.

A second publication worthy of note is an article written in the journal *Stemmen voor Waarheid en Vrede* in 1879. In this article, Van Toorenenbergen defended his position on the confession as “*gereformeed*,” a title which he felt had been unduly claimed exclusively by A. Kuyper *cum suis*. Van Toorenenbergen felt that his own position with respect to confessional subscription was closer to the position of GS Dordrecht 1618-19 than that of Kuyper. Dort had envisaged a tri-annual revision of the confessions, and thus could bind to all the articles of the confession. This,

⁴¹¹ Doedes, *De NGB en HC*.

⁴¹² First of all, the issue in this debate was the reason why the professors refused to subscribe via FS-1619. Van Toorenenbergen argued that the professors considered it too strict while Kuyper argued that the problem arose from the soured relationship between the church and the state. Secondly, the debate was strictly historiographical. Key documents in this debate were Van Toorenenbergen, *Symbolische schriften* and Kuyper, *Leidsche professoren*. See Kamphuis, "Reünie door Reformatie".

Van Toorenenbergen claimed, could not be done in the late nineteenth century. Hence subscription to the essence of the confessions is more in line with Dordt than subscribing the substance of the confessions. Van Toorenenbergen admitted that his position on confessions was like that of the Remonstrants, but rejected the idea that this made him a Remonstrant.⁴¹³

These publications make clear that Van Toorenenbergen was slowly drifting away from the Juridical Calvinist position on confessional subscription. Up until this 1879 publication, Van Toorenenbergen had emphasized the priority of the Gospel preaching over the juridical application of the confession in a situation of general apostasy. With this publication, he actually began to undermine the juridical role that a confession might play. Not unlike Da Costa before him, Van Toorenenbergen focused particular attention on the fact that a confession is a confession of belief convictions held—what can be referred to as the subjective character of a confession—and considered the Three Forms of Unity increasingly less suitable to serve in their present form as confessions of the NHK.

2.9.2.6 GEREFORMEERDEN: A. KUYPER

In his 1868 speech, Van Toorenenbergen had implicitly criticized a paragraph in Rev. A. Kuyper's inaugural sermon in Utrecht. Rev. A. Kuyper, first of Utrecht and since 1870 of Amsterdam, did not leave this unanswered. His response in 1870⁴¹⁴ became the first of several key documents on confessional subscription within the camp of the *Gereformeerden*, the camp that claimed to seek to uphold the Three Forms of Unity as GS Dordrecht 1618-19 had intended, a claim strengthened by the fact that when the *Gereformeerden* separated from the NHK, they returned to CO-1619, including FS-1619. The influence of Kuyper's thoughts on confessional subscription within present day Dutch Calvinist circles is second only to those of Groen van Prinsterer. Many were convinced by Kuyper's arguments, and thus there arose alongside the existing factions an activist school of *Gereformeerden* who, in many respects, were not unlike the Seceders when it came to confessional subscription.

Kuyper had a prolific writing style and wrote much on the subject. This study draws on writings taken from a much larger body of his writings on confessions and confessional subscription. The following five should suffice to give a good impression of Kuyper's position:

1. The speech held in 1870 in reaction to Van Toorenenbergen.⁴¹⁵
2. A public letter written by Kuyper,⁴¹⁶ in which *inter alia* he discusses the ecclesiastical issue. This publication is famous because it contains an autobiographical account of Kuyper's conversion from Liberalism via Ethicalism to Calvinism. In this publication a number of things were said about confessional subscription, particularly in response to Gunning's stance.⁴¹⁷
3. Kuyper's response in 1873 to Van Toorenenbergen's argument that the original intention had been to revise the confessions once every three years. Entitled "Revision of the Revision Legend" it was a detailed eighty-odd-page study on the authority of confessions.⁴¹⁸
4. Ten years later, Kuyper addressed the issue again in an important publication. Entitled "Tract for the Reformation of the Churches," it was intended to serve as a platform upon

⁴¹³ Van Toorenenbergen, *Symbolische schriften*, ix-xxxviii. Van Toorenenbergen, "Brieven".

⁴¹⁴ This speech was not published until 1879. In its introduction Kuyper erroneously recorded the speech as having been held in 1869. See Praamsma, *Kuyper*, 89, n. 13.

⁴¹⁵ Kuyper, "Referaat".

⁴¹⁶ Kuyper had formed an association of orthodox members of the church council of Amsterdam who would meet prior to council meetings. A certain J. H. van der Linden had criticised this in a magazine. This publication was written in response to that criticism.

⁴¹⁷ Kuyper, *Confidentie*.

⁴¹⁸ Kuyper, *Revisie*.

Historical Part

which the NHK might be reformed. This publication spanned more than two hundred pages and presented a detailed description of Kuyper's ecclesiology at this stage. At certain points the issue of confessional subscription was raised.⁴¹⁹

5. An article entitled "Calvinism and Revision." Initially it was written for the American scene where Presbyterian churches were considering revising the Westminster Standards. In 1891, the article was published as a separate booklet in Dutch.⁴²⁰

Much of relevance to this present study can be drawn from the foregoing publications but the following remarks must suffice.

Kuyper's doctrine on the church played an important role in how he viewed confessions. Kuyper distinguished between the church as an organism and the church as an institution.⁴²¹ He also applied this to the confession: the confession of the heart (organism) and the confession on paper (institution). His view of confessions as working organically approximated that of the Ethicals; his view of confessions as an institution was very much like that of the Apologists. By means of this dualism, Kuyper overcame the dilemma of playing out the subjective and objective sides of a confession against each other, a point of tension between the medical and juridical wings of the Calvinist camp. It should be pointed out, however, that as time passed Kuyper focused increasingly on the institutional character of the confession, so his stance took on a formalistic appearance.⁴²²

Somewhat intriguing is Kuyper's position on the character of confessional subscription. In his earlier documents he advocated what came close to a literal binding, binding even to lines of argument and proof texts, though maintaining room for a *jus discretionis*. In later publications he clearly advocated a substantive binding: *quia* with respect to the substance and *quatenus* with respect to the form, possibly because he realized that change would not take place quickly. Although it is clear that Kuyper advocated a position on confessional binding stricter than that of Groen, it is not possible to state precisely how Kuyper thought on this point. This vagueness may be because Kuyper himself had substantial objections to BC art. 36, a widely known fact, used on occasions by Kuyper's opponents to accuse him of hypocrisy.

This leads to consideration of Kuyper's position on revision of the confession. The earlier publications give the impression that Kuyper defended his view of non-revision primarily with historical arguments. This can be explained in view of the fact that his opponent, Van Toorenenbergen, used historical arguments to prove his point of view. The article "Calvinism and Confessional Revision" makes clear, however, that Kuyper's position on confessional revision is based on more than just historical argumentation. It is especially enmeshed in his view of the church (the institutional aspect of the church and the church as diachronically catholic) and the nature of confessional documents (as graces of providence). Kuyper's programme for confessional revision is of special interest since it was followed by the GKN between 1896 and 1905 in revising BC art. 36. It should be further noted that Kuyper considered such revision to be an endeavour in which the catholic (worldwide) church should be involved. However, Kuyper also held that

⁴¹⁹ Kuyper, *Tractaat*. Dr. H. Bavinck of the CGKN reacted to especially the fourth section of this tract: Bavinck, "Tractaat door Kuyper".

⁴²⁰ Kuyper, *Calvinisme en Revisie* (English version: Kuyper, "Calvinism and Confessional Revision").

⁴²¹ On the concept "organicism" with Kuyper see Van den Berg, "Kerk en Wereld", 143-151.

⁴²² See Augustijn and Vree, *Kuyper*, 86-108 for a recently written overview of the development of Kuyper's ecclesiology. Vree concludes that Kuyper's ideas on this point went through several stages. Where it concerns Kuyper's view of the confessions the link is made very early on, at the stage where Kuyper meant by "organism" and "institute" no more than the internal and external sides to a phenomenon. One should certainly not read it in the light of Kuyper's stance in 1899, when "organism" and "institute" were presented as two separate entities. For an English language overview of Kuyper's ecclesiology see McGoldrick, *Kuyper*, 126-140.

because new confessions are born as a cry emanating from the heart, they can never be drawn up by a committee.

Consideration is also due to the way in which Kuyper distinguished between the Three Forms of Unity. Over against Van Toorenenbergen, who had described the Canons of Dort as confessional apocrypha, Kuyper typified the Canons of Dort as an appendix to the Belgic Confession and considered the Walcheren Articles of the same order.

One may conclude, therefore, that the *Gereformeerde* stance, as outlined by Kuyper, defended a manner of subscription to the confessions that was not altogether clearly defined. Kuyper attempted to account for both the subjective and objective sides of a confession, and defended a manner of subscription that is positioned somewhere between substantial and literal binding. He had a high view of confessions: they were to be the most pure echo of God's Word, and thus documents to be preserved until the End. Confessional documents in their substance mark the boundary between what may and may not be tolerated. Nevertheless, Kuyper took into account their human origin and noted the possibility of a *jus discretionis*.

Whatever one may think of Kuyper's position as a whole, it is clear that Kuyper did his utmost to take into account the various, sometimes paradoxical, factors that play a role in the phenomenon of confessional subscription.

2.9.2.7 THE DOLEANTIE⁴²³

In 1834 there had been a sizeable exodus from the NHK, leading eventually to the formation of the CGKN and several other much smaller groups of orthodox reformed churches. During the nineteenth century, individuals, small groups, and several congregations left the NHK, either to join these dissenters, or to form independent congregations, or to disappear into atheism.⁴²⁴ In 1886, a second large exodus began to take place. This subsection looks at the church schism of 1886-1887, which has gone down in history as the Doleantie, the schism that saw many *Gereformeerden* leave the NHK.

2.9.2.7.1 Causes for the Doleantie

Like the Secession of 1834, the Doleantie of 1886 was precipitated by the combination of heterodoxy itself and its toleration, if not stimulation, by ecclesiastical authorities. However, the Secession was very much a people's reaction against perceived injustice: initially only six ministers, and very young ones at that, broke with the NHK. The Secession also proved to be spontaneous, and it took many decades to gather many of the splinters into one association. The Doleantie, on the other hand, was initially conceived as an academic response to perceived injustice. Its strategists were primarily two professors in theology at the Free University, A. Kuyper and F. L. Rutgers, and a doctor in both law and theology serving as minister in one of the churches, Rev. W. van den Bergh of Voorthuizen. Although events overtook the strategists, the Doleantie proved to be a reasonably co-ordinated break-away from the NHK, resulting in the constitution of a temporary association of almost all (if not all) seceding congregations and groups. One might describe the Doleantie in its broadest sense as an academically thought out and concerted reaction to heterodox theology and church polity in the NHK.

The timing of the Doleantie can be put down to two general factors. The first of these is the flux in the persuasional organizations. The composition of the conservative camp was changing drastically. Ethicals had begun a dialogue with Modernists and Groninger-Evangelicals, the

⁴²³ Bakker, *Doleantie* (includes a good bibliography); Dijk, *Doleantie*; Rullmann, *Doleantie*; Volger, *Vrijheid*, 173ff.; Bremmer, *Kuyper, Hoedemaker en de Doleantie*; Deddens and Kamphuis, *Doleantie-Wederkeer*; Van Oene, *Patrimony Profile*, 130-155; McGoldrick, *Kuyper*, 87-97. There appears to be little in the English language on the Doleantie, possibly because the CRCNA predates the Doleantie.

⁴²⁴ See Selderhuis, *Kerkgeschiedenis*, 665-669. The history of many such churches can be found in Hoekstra and Ipenburg, *Wegwijs*.

Apologist school had proven ineffective, and many Juridical Calvinists were becoming increasingly medical. For within the juridical wing, many ministers valued association with the NHK higher than their bond with the Confessions, and the CV had effectively sidelined itself. Disgruntled Juridicals, who remained convinced of the need to uphold the truth as laid out in the Three Forms of Unity above all else, found an able and outspoken leader in Rev. Dr. A. Kuyper of Amsterdam. His sharp pen and activist approach upset many, but drew in those who believed “it” would finally happen. Thus all the ingredients were present for a schism to occur. In fact, the dam burst even before Kuyper thought it would.

The second general factor is that of the specific events that proved to be the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back. The first of these was the matter of profession of faith. Church councils in which all the elders were conservative not only refused to allow liberal candidate members to be examined by their own ministers, but also refused to give an attestation of good conduct necessary for such candidate members to be examined elsewhere (see 2.9.2.7). This resulted in a deadlock, which the ecclesiastical boards decided to break by deposing church councils. The second event was the graduation of the first theology student from the Free University. Convinced of the need for academia to be free from both state and church influence, Kuyper had established a *Free University* in Amsterdam. Because Kuyper refused to bring the University under the oversight of the synod, the prevailing authorities refused to create room for Free University graduates to enter the ministry, and thus churches chose to go their own way. In many places an exodus took place on account of a declaration of solidarity with those who had been disciplined by the NHK.

In summary, the Doleantie finds its general cause in the permeation of heterodoxy within the NHK and the church’s unwillingness to deal with it. During the early 1880s, the chasm between the medical and juridical wings had widened to such an extent that extremes began to overrule and a charismatic leader such as Kuyper could find a following. Specific causes for the Doleantie can be found in the deadlocks that occurred over the admission of candidate members, and the refusal of the NHK to have graduates from the Free University ordained as ministers.

2.9.2.7.2 The Course of Events

In 1883, a new form of subscription came into force that extremely upset the conservatives. The weekly *Heraut*, which Kuyper edited, advised churches to establish committees to consider this matter and have these committees meet in a conference to discuss a national course of action. The conference was organized by the church of Amsterdam and held on April 11, 1883. Condition for entry to the conference was subscription to the Three Forms of Unity. In all, some 250 church council members were in attendance. Though plans of action were discussed, no real activity came forth from this conference. Important for the later course of events was the decision that, in a critical situation, the church of Amsterdam would have the authority to convene a new conference.

Contrary to Kuyper’s intentions, the Doleantie became not a national affair but a combination of local and national conflicts. To illustrate this, it is helpful briefly to review the history of the first three *Dolerende* churches, Kootwijk, Voorthuizen, and Reitsum, and then that of Amsterdam.

Kootwijk was a small farming village in the hills of the Veluwe. Its inhabitants were poor, and the church was supported with funds from the national fund for needy churches. After a lengthy period of vacancy, the church asked the first theological graduate from the Free University, J. H. Houtzagers, whether he would consider a call. A request to CB Harderwijk to have Houtzagers examined and declared eligible for call was, however, turned down. Kootwijk then approached the churches of the classis individually, requesting them to examine Houtzagers. Through the co-operation of the church councils of Voorthuizen and Nijkerk an examination was held, attended by ministers from Voorthuizen, Nijkerk, Amsterdam (2 ministers), Rotterdam, and Bunschoten. Upon successful completion of the examination, Houtzagers subscribed the Three Forms of Unity and was declared eligible for call. The call from Kootwijk was then officially extended. Houtzagers accepted, even though it was not clear how his stipend would be paid since it had become clear that the NHK would not tolerate the dissident action of the churches in Classis

Harderwijk. On February 2, 1886, CB Harderwijk suspended the office bearers of Kootwijk, and the following day Kootwijk decided to break its bond with the boards of the NHK and become a *Dolerende* (grieving) church. The Doleantie had begun.

The Kootwijkers had received much assistance from Rev. W. van den Bergh, minister of the neighbouring church in Voorthuizen. Van den Bergh was not only well educated—he held a doctor's title in both law and theology—he was also a man of principle. Before accepting the call to Voorthuizen, he had received a well-considered guarantee from its church council that it would place faithfulness to God's Word above all human authority. Already in September 1885, the church council acknowledged that it was living in disobedience to Jesus Christ as long as it continued to live under the regulations of the NHK. However, unsure of how to effect its repentance, the council kept this decision from the public. The council took the suspension of the office bearers in Amsterdam and Kootwijk as their cue, and thus also broke with the boards of the NHK to become a grieving church.⁴²⁵

In the province of Friesland, some hundred miles north of the Veluwe, Rev. J. J. A. Ploos van Amstel served as minister in the village of Reitsum. On account of his reformed convictions, parents from all over the region came to him to have their children baptized, much to the chagrin of the ecclesiastical boards. When the majority of office bearers in Amsterdam had been suspended, Ploos van Amstel and most of his colleagues in Classis Dokkum signed a statement declaring their solidarity with the suspended office bearers. In February of 1886, Ploos van Amstel was no longer comfortable with his position as minister in the NHK and withdrew from the church, urging members of his congregation to do the same. They heeded the voice of their pastor, and thus Reitsum became the third church of the Doleantie.⁴²⁶

The three churches of Kootwijk, Voorthuizen, and Reitsum had no inclinations towards independency. On June 16, delegates from the three churches met, demonstrating the federal ties these three churches considered to exist between them. In November 1886 there were six churches who met in this way: Kootwijk, Voorthuizen, Reitsum, Kollum, Gerkesklooster, and Leiderdorp.

The suspension of office bearers in Amsterdam has already been mentioned a number of times above. It was the situation there that precipitated action in many regions of The Netherlands, and thus it is proper to present a brief overview of the exodus that took place in the nation's capital. After the introduction of general suffrage, the Amsterdam Church Council became increasingly orthodox. In 1872, some elders in Amsterdam began boycotting the examination of liberal candidate members. In course of time most of the elders in Amsterdam were conservative, and liberal catechism students were forced to apply for examination in neighbouring churches.⁴²⁷ However, the church council prevented this by refusing to issue the necessary attestation of good conduct. The parents of the candidate members in question appealed this decision, but the church council refused to budge. Through a series of appeals the matter finally reached the table of the ASC, which issued an ultimatum: the attestations had to be issued before January 8, 1886. On December 3, 1885, the church council decided it would not comply with this ultimatum. On December 15 the church council instructed its "church committee" (the committee in charge of the assets of the church)⁴²⁸ that, should there be a breach, the assets would have to belong to the party that maintained the Word of God. Of the hundred church council members, eighty voted in favour. These eighty—five ministers, forty-two elders (among whom were Prof. A. Kuyper and

⁴²⁵ On the role of Van den Bergh in and after the Doleantie see Arntzen, "Van den Bergh".

⁴²⁶ On the role of Ploos van Amstel in and after the Doleantie see Wesseling, "Ploos van Amstel".

⁴²⁷ The issue came to a stale-mate when the consistory appointed the elders A. Kuyper and F. L. Rutgers, both professors of the Free University, to be assistants of the Modernist Rev. E. Laurillard.

⁴²⁸ In 1868 a national committee attempted to bring all the assets of congregations belonging to the NHK under the supervision of provincial and a general committee (see Vree, *Kuyper in de Kiem*, 247ff.). By the 1880's the assets of many churches were indeed controlled provincially and nationally. Amsterdam was one of the exceptions.

Prof. F. L. Rutgers) and thirty-three deacons—were subsequently suspended by CB Amsterdam on January 4, 1886. The suspended office bearers appealed this decision, upon which PB Noord-Holland deposed the office bearers, a decision confirmed by Synod Contracta during the summer. An appeal to a full synod in the autumn of 1886 failed. On December 16, 1886, seventy-five of the eighty deposed office bearers together with a sizeable portion of the church's members declared themselves independent from the boards of the NHK. Thus Amsterdam also came to have a grieving church.

The church of Amsterdam had received the mandate in 1883 to convene a new congress of conservatives should the need for this be felt. The situation being critical, the grieving church of Amsterdam convened a congress for January 11-14, 1887. An unexpectedly large number turned up, 300 persons from Amsterdam and 1200 from elsewhere.⁴²⁹ The condition for entry was subscription to the Three Forms of Unity and to the statement that every member of the NHK had the duty to liberate himself from the yoke of synodical hierarchy. This congress served as mutual encouragement and united the troubled conservatives in a concerted course of action.

However, not all Juridical conservatives, not even all *Gereformeerde* conservatives, were enthralled with the action being undertaken. The Congress Movement, as it became known, met with much opposition, primarily from its closest allies. Dr. P. J. Hoedemaker, professor at the Free University, felt very uncomfortable with what he saw as illegal schismatic activity. To his way of thinking, only church councils, not individuals, could cast off the yoke of synodical hierarchy. Also, the conservative Rev. G. J. Vos, minister in Amsterdam, secretary of CB Amsterdam and member of PB Noord-Holland, had become a vehement opponent to the course of events. Vos was primarily responsible for the speedy (though not entirely in accordance with regulations) reaction of the higher church boards. Through Hoedemaker and Vos, the “confessional centre” voiced its objections in a spirit of fervent patriotism, and in opposition to a particular ecclesiology they strove for the preservation of the NHK. As Da Costa and Groen had parted ways in the late 1840s, so Kuyper *cum suis* and Hoedemaker *cum suis* here parted ways.⁴³⁰

Subsequent to the Congress of January 1887, the trickle of dissenting churches became a flood. In June of 1887 these grieving churches gathered in a synodical assembly convened by the church at Voorthuizen. At this assembly, the churches adopted the federal name “*Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Kerken (Dolerend) in Nederland*” (NDGK—Nether-Dutch Reformed Churches (Grieving) in The Netherlands). The churches opted to form a provisional association of churches since they were all agreed that union had to be sought with all churches who desired to be faithful to God's Word and had broken from the hierarchy of the NHK. For the sake of completeness, it is worth noting that a union with the CGKN took place in 1892, where the association of *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (GKN—Reformed Churches in The Netherlands) was born.

2.9.2.7.3 Summary and Concluding Remarks

Like the Secession, the Doleantie has its general origin in the liberty of doctrine and the heterodox church polity within the NHK. A situation had been created in which Kuyper's more extreme approach met with appreciation, and several specific factors, especially the problems surrounding the admission of candidate members and the existence of a theological faculty in the Free University, served as catalysts for the schism of 1886-1887. It began with a few churches, but after a well-attended congress in January of 1887, many churches and groups of NHK members broke with the boards of the NHK and became grieving. Strictly speaking, they had not broken with the NHK, only with its regulative structure. However, as they were not recognized by the

⁴²⁹ The number is all the more telling since the meeting was held in the middle of winter, travel costs were high and Amsterdam felt compelled to charge an entry fee for attendance of 1 guilder.

⁴³⁰ See Rullmann, *Doleantie*, 66-68, Abma and De Bruijn, *Hoedemaker*, 20-22, 63ff; Luteijn, *Honderd Jaar CV*, 66-98; Kamphuis, *Op zoek naar de belijdende volkskerk*.

NHK as legitimate bodies, the churches began to establish themselves as an independent association of churches.

The Doleantie literally tore apart the conservative camp within the NHK, and the Congress of 1887 proved to be the watershed. Now that many *Gereformeerden* had expressed their preference for the Three Forms of Unity over against the ecclesiastical institute of the NHK, those *Gereformeerden* who were not prepared to go that far joined forces with the confessional centre. For example, Hoedemaker took on a leadership role in the CV. Both the departure of the extreme juridical wing and the increasing influence of the medical wing over the remaining Juridicals gave the conservative camp remaining within the NHK very much a medical appearance.

2.9.2.8 GEREFORMEERD IN THE NHK: P. J. HOEDEMAKER

At the eleventh hour, Prof. P. J. Hoedemaker of Amsterdam refused to participate in Kuyper's reformation movement. He went on to become a leading figure of the *Gereformeerden* who chose to remain within the NHK, the more active wing of the CV. In Hoedemaker's view, the NHK as God's church in The Netherlands could not be left on its own. In the years that followed the Doleantie, he defended his position on the church, particularly with respect to the NHK, repeatedly over against the (Kuyperian) *Gereformeerden*. The issue of confessional subscription is discussed in several of his publications.

Two key publications dating from the late 1880s in which Hoedemaker's position is outlined are now considered. The first is a public letter written to the Consistory of the Nederlandsche Hervormde Congregation in Schaarsbergen, which had called Hoedemaker to serve there as minister. The second is the publication of an extempore speech given by Hoedemaker for a group who did not join the Doleantie.⁴³¹

Hoedemaker was as attached to the Three Forms of Unity as Kuyper *cum suis*. This is evident from the fact that Hoedemaker was professor at the Free University, where subscription to these Forms was mandatory. Hoedemaker differed from Kuyper on how such confessions should be viewed. He distanced himself from the objectifying approach that Kuyper *cum suis* took the confessions. He placed more emphasis on the subjective character of a confession, and accordingly had more affinity with the line taken by Da Costa and the Ethicals than with Groen van Prinsterer and the Juridical Calvinists.

The real point of divergence between Hoedemaker and Kuyper lay in an issue not directly pertinent (though certainly influential) to confessional subscription: their ecclesiology⁴³² and respective assessments of the NHK. Kuyper *cum suis* forced the NHK to undertake action, and concluded from the disciplinary action undertaken by the NHK that existence as a church independent of the NHK was justified. Hoedemaker, however, considered this improper since the issue over which the split occurred was a juridical matter, not the real issue of reformed doctrine. Although he considered independent existence as a (local) church within the NHK justified—Hoedemaker was never fully consistent in his anti-factional stance—he was unwilling to let go of the NHK altogether. The real difference between Hoedemaker and Kuyper thus lay in their ecclesiology. With respect to the visible organized church, Kuyper took his stance on the autonomy of the local church and considered an association of churches to be a federation by common accord. Hoedemaker considered the church to be an organic whole. On this score, Hoedemaker claimed the choice was either the path of Secession or of remaining fully in the NHK. Kuyper's idea of setting up an association of churches within the NHK was, to his way of thinking,

⁴³¹ Hoedemaker, "Schaarsbergen". Hoedemaker, *De roeping der gereformeerden*.

⁴³² Van Eijnatten alleges that underlying their difference in ecclesiology was in turn their view of spiritual and material matter (Van Eijnatten, *God, Nederland en Oranje*, 272-273).

entirely out of order. However, it is beyond the scope of this present study to explore this theme further.⁴³³

Thus Hoedemaker and Kuyper held essentially the same position with respect to confessional subscription. The only difference was one of emphasis, especially as seen from Hoedemaker's perspective. Hoedemaker considered that Kuyper overly objectified the confession, especially in considering it to be an accord of fellowship; he himself emphasized the subjective character of a confession. Hoedemaker objected to the petrification of "doctrine" within the NHK, an approach he considered was perpetuated by Kuyper in his view of the confession as an accord of fellowship. On the point of confessional subscription as such, there is much affinity between the stance of Hoedemaker and that of Van Toorenenbergen or Gunning jr., although it is readily apparent that there were also many differences among them.⁴³⁴

2.9.3 ANALYSIS

The 1870s and 1880s were a period of increasing factionalism within the NHK. Positions had been taken, and the various factions battled for the right to exist and even for overall control. During this period there was little development in the positions on confessional subscription apart from further distinctions being made within the Calvinist camp. A brief summary is now given of the positions on confessional subscription as they relate to several aspects.

It is apparent from the material discussed that ecclesiology played an important role in determining one's position on confessional subscription. In fact, a position on confessional subscription was often a derivative or necessary consequence of one's view of the church. This applied across the board to all persuasions. The Modernist Van Boneval Faure argued that the church is an institution to serve religious needs, *fides qua*. As such there can be no prescribed faith or fixed doctrine in the church. Such was considered a Roman Catholic practice unbecoming to a Protestant Church such as the NHK. Groninger-Evangelicals and Ethicals were keen on maintaining the status quo, Groninger-Evangelicals being content with the measure of liberty allowed in the NHK, and Ethicals considering doctrinal liberty a necessary step in the purification of the church. Apologists were also very tolerant but felt there should at least be a basic agreement in doctrine, else the church would have no identity. Likewise, Calvinists believed doctrine to be essential for the church. Basically there were three positions: doctrine is at odds with the character of the church, doctrine plays a role in the church, and doctrine is essential to the church.

When it came to the epistemological question of the truth, Modernists formed a faction of their own. For Modernists, the truth was a matter of pursuit, something towards which one strove. For conservatives, the truth was a matter of revelation, which had been entrusted to the Church. Since Modernists and conservatives considered confessions to be receptacles into which truth was placed, Modernists considered confessions of momentary value while conservatives considered them of lasting value. It should be noted that Groninger-Evangelicals and Ethicals operated on a different plane: they defined "truth" not as an issue of "knowledge" (*fides quae*) but of "ethics" (*fides qua*).

Apologists and Calvinists varied somewhat in their characterization of the confessions. The Apologist Doedes continued to emphasize that confessions only function ecclesiastically. In a similar vein, the Calvinist Van Toorenenbergen picked up an old theme by emphasizing that confessions are a norm for teaching in the church, not for the truth. The Calvinist Hoedemaker argued the opposite point of view: confessions are not juridical documents, and subscription has everything to do with one's personal convictions. The Calvinist Kuyper stood between these two

⁴³³ On Hoedemaker's view of the church see Rasker, *De NHK vanaf 1795*, 255-257, Scheers, *Hoedemaker*, 201-207; Bos, "Hoedemaker".

⁴³⁴ I am thus rather surprised to observe that J. J. Van Toorenenbergen does not appear in the names index of either Scheers, *Hoedemaker*, or Abma and De Bruijn, *Hoedemaker*.

extremes. Initially he pointed out that confessions have an organic and an institutional side, the former relating to the heart and the latter relating to its role in the church. However, as time went on, Kuyper particularly emphasized the institutional side of a confession; he pointed out that subscription to confessions is essential to the church as an institution of instruction, and that unity in confession is a *sine qua non* for an association of churches.

The foregoing paragraph outlines the positions *in abstracto*. If, however, one replaces “confessions” with “Three Forms of Unity,” a somewhat different picture emerges. Doedes and Van Toorenenbergen were not so convinced that the Three Forms of Unity were essential to the NHK. Kuyper was convinced that they were essential to the NHK, and Hoedemaker was also a fervent defender of the Three Forms of Unity. Combining the abstract and factual positions meant there were actually three positions: that of Doedes and Van Toorenenbergen, that of Kuyper, and that of Hoedemaker.

At this point, two issues touched on only by Kuyper are worth noting. Kuyper emphasized that the authority of a confession rests on God’s Word. Thus a confession will be considered by a subscriber to be the most accurate and most pure echo of Scripture. In view of the high authority of the confession, he noted that only Christ could change the confession. Thus revising a confession is a matter of the catholic (i.e. worldwide) church. Secondly, Kuyper believed that a confession should only contain matters essential unto salvation. Theoretically speaking, one cannot then distinguish between more and less fundamental articles in a confession.

It was particularly on the issue of confessional revision that Van Toorenenbergen and Kuyper parted company. Van Toorenenbergen argued that confessions were never intended to be permanent writings; GS Dordrecht 1618-19 had intended for them to be updated every three years. In view of the fact that the Three Forms of Unity had not been updated for some two hundred and fifty years, Van Toorenenbergen considered them out of date. Kuyper was not convinced that GS Dordrecht had intended the confession to be updated once every three years. He considered development in theology since 1619 to be of such poor quality that the Three Forms of Unity could not really be considered out-of-date.

Van Toorenenbergen considered strict subscription to confessions possible only if there was a tri-annual revision. He noted that one confirms the confession by improving and purifying it. Kuyper argued that strict subscription only makes sense if one intends the confession to remain fixed. Otherwise one will never be sure of what one is bound to.

This reveals the kernel of the matter: the type of subscription advocated by the various persuasions. Modernists denied every bond with the confession. Apologists advocated an essential binding. In view of the prevailing situation, Van Toorenenbergen advocated an essential rather than a substantive binding. Kuyper advocated a substantive binding, though he seems, at least initially, to have advocated a binding that comes close to being literal. No real data dating from the 1870s and 1880s has appeared to indicate that Ethicals and Groninger-Evangelicals modified their positions.

One of the issues that continued to trouble the waters of confessional subscription was the tension between the objective and subjective sides of a confession. Van Oosterzee wrote in his dogmatics that a confession is an expression of the joys of the heart, and Van Toorenenbergen emphasized that a confession must express one’s personal faith, thus highlighting its subjective character. Kuyper, on the other hand, emphasized the objective side of a confession, even describing it as primarily a contract between local churches for federating into a larger body. Hoedemaker opposed Kuyper on this point. He drove a wedge between the concepts “doctrine” and “confession,” noting that doctrine is to confession what a corpse is to a living body. In Hoedemaker’s view, a confession was primarily subjective, and thus a line of argument from Da Costa returns even with the *Gereformeerde* Hoedemaker.

With respect to confessions, the last issue to be reviewed is the characterization of the types of confessions. Van Toorenenbergen considered the Canons of Dort, together with the Walcheren Articles and various Consensus, to be apocrypha among confessions. Kuyper considered the

Canons to be an appendix to the Belgic Confession with confessional status. Both Van Toorenbergen and Kuyper indicated that confessions (proper) and catechisms are also of a different character.

An issue not directly related to confessional subscription, but nevertheless pertinent to understanding the parting of ways within the Juridical Calvinist camp, is the issue of ecclesiastical reorganization. Kuyper and Hoedemaker shared essentially the same view of the confessions, where the differences between them were ones of emphases, a fact that at least Hoedemaker did not realize. Their ways parted, however, on the matter of their views of the NHK. Kuyper believed the NHK had the means to exercise doctrinal discipline, and the fact that it failed to do so legitimized breaking with the NHK organization. Hoedemaker believed the NHK did not have the means to exercise doctrinal discipline, and held that these means should first be restored. Thus Kuyper considered it appropriate to achieve his goal via the existing regulations, whereas Hoedemaker considered this to be out of the question. As a result, Hoedemaker focused on reorganization of the NHK in order to return to the confessions, while Kuyper was willing to break with the NHK in order to return to the confessions. With respect to confessional subscription, it meant that Kuyper's stance was almost identical to that of the Seceders.⁴³⁵

In conclusion, development in reflection on confessional subscription during the 1870s and 1880s is to be found primarily in the Calvinist camp. This reflection was very much determined by the situation in which the Calvinists found themselves. The difficulties in the NHK subsided after 1888, when the activist faction within the Calvinist camp had left the NHK to form an association of churches of their own.

2.9.4 CLOSING REMARK

The Doleantie was a milestone in reflection on confessional subscription. For the NHK, it marked a temporary end to a long and tiresome struggle. It would take almost two decades for the Calvinist camp to regroup sufficiently to raise the issue in the NHK again. The Doleantie also led to the formation of a new association of churches, the GKN, with formidable scholars. The GKN set about doing what it charged the NHK with neglecting to do: revitalizing and maintaining the reformed confession. In practice, this would prove to be a more cumbersome task than many had anticipated.

⁴³⁵ The difference is that the Seceders for the most part left the church of their own free will while the Dolerenden for the most part left on account of being disciplined.

2.10 Consolidation (1890—the mid 1940s)

With the formation of the GKN, there existed alongside the NHK another large association of churches in The Netherlands with its roots in the sixteenth century Calvinist Reformation. For the NHK, it meant that a sizeable portion of its most orthodox membership had left, changing the composition of the church membership and removing the most agitating force as far as confessional subscription was concerned. The NHK still had to resolve the issue of persuasional cohabitation, but the pressure had eased somewhat. The GKN was faced with the inner urge to practise what it preached, yet had never been able to achieve. The GKN encountered all sorts of difficulties putting theory into practice, which in turn led to further reflection on confessional subscription. The period stretching from 1890 to the mid 1940s might be considered a period of consolidation for both associations of churches.

The mid 1940s has been chosen as end point for two reasons. For the NHK, the end of World War II meant a renewed effort to reorganize, an effort that was to culminate successfully in the adoption of a new church order effective in 1951. For the GKN, 1944 was the year in which the church divided over a number of doctrinal and church political issues in which confessional subscription played an important part.

This section begins by briefly sketching the ecclesiastical scene during this period (2.10.1), then reviews publications and events during this period that relate to confessional subscription (2.10.2), and closes with some concluding remarks for this period (2.10.3).

2.10.1 THE ECCLESIASTICAL SCENE

There now existed a number of smaller and larger associations of churches in The Netherlands that traced their origins to the Calvinist Reformation. Within the NHK were also various factions, and a similar phenomenon soon appeared in the GKN. Hence this study takes a two-tiered approach to describing the various factions within Reformed The Netherlands during the twentieth century. The various churches and the factions within them will be described, primarily with a view to the matter of confessional subscription. Where appropriate, the factions in different churches that may be considered to have championed the same ends will be highlighted.

2.10.1.1 THE NHK

For the 1870s and 1880s, the following factions known as persuasions were distinguished: Modernists (Idealist and Empiricist), Groninger-Evangelicals, the Apologist School, Ethicals (Old and Young), and Juridical Calvinists (Evangelical Confessionals, Juridical Confessionals, and *Gereformeerden*). The shifting of allegiances that took place in the course of the nineteenth century continued into the twentieth century. A brief overview will make clear the shifts that had taken place, and show that when it comes to the spectrum of persuasions within the NHK, little had changed since the 1850s.

During the course of the 1890s, the rift widened between the older, more optimistic and younger, more pessimistic Modernists. The newer generation came to realize that one could not plead for absolute freedom in matters of faith within the church since it is a Christian church. This shift towards the 'right' led to concerted efforts for more co-operation within the church, which eventually led to the formation of provincial associations for Liberal *Hervormden*, in which Modernists and Groninger-Evangelicals united (hence the change from 'Modernist' to 'Liberal'). The various associations federated into a national body in 1913. Liberalism as a faction was divided between a more orthodox-tinted right-wing, referred to as the Malcontents, and a left-wing which continued the older form of Modernism.

Within the ranks of the Groninger-Evangelicals, a rift had also manifested itself. The more conservative Groninger-Evangelicals sought the company of Ethicals, especially when they came under the influence of Barth's dialectical theology. The more liberal Groninger-Evangelicals

Historical Part

sought the company of the Liberals. As mentioned, the more liberal Groninger-Evangelicals became part of the Liberals in the NHK.

The Young Ethicals continued to defend their ideals; namely, that truth and reality is not found in concepts but in the life of the heart. Ethicals became an influential faction within the NHK. In the course of the 1930s and beyond, they were strongly influenced by Barth's dialectical theology, resulting in a turn towards more traditional Reformed emphases. It should be pointed out that J. H. Gunning jr. joined forces with the *Gereformeerde* P. J. Hoedemaker during the first decade of the twentieth century.

In 1864, the *Confessionele Vereniging* had been established to fight for the confessional cause. During the 1870s, the CV had already sidelined itself in the machinery of the NHK and taken on more of a medical hue. Within the CV one can detect the formation of two parties, earlier referred to as the more passive Juridical-Confessionals and the more activist *Gereformeerden*. A substantial number of *Gereformeerden* left the NHK, and thus also the CV. However, not all *Gereformeerden* had departed with Kuyper. For a short period, Hoedemaker took it upon himself to lead the CV, but averse to all factionalism as he was, he soon left it. During the first decade of the twentieth century, a power struggle developed within the CV leading to a split. There were various reasons for the new division. One of these concerned a difference in ecclesiology and the functioning of confessions in the church. The right wing eventually separated from the CV and in 1906 formed the "*Gereformeerde Bond tot Verbreiding en Verdediging van de Waarheid in de NHK*" ("The *Gereformeerde* Alliance for the Spreading and Defence of the Truth in the NHK). It is generally referred to as the (*Gereformeerde*) *Bond* and its followers as (*Gereformeerde*) *Bonders* or *Gereformeerde Hervormden*.

The CV, due especially to the exodus of its 'right wing', took on more the characteristics of the Evangelical Confessional position defended by Van Toorenenbergen. Within these circles, there was also evidence of dialectical influences, though not to the extent found with Ethicals. Members of the CV were referred to as *Confessionelen*.

Finally, mention should be made of the "Friends of Kohlbrugge". This was a small group who defended the theology of Kohlbrugge with its heavy, somewhat Lutheran, emphasis on the doctrine of justification. The Kohlbruggianen, as they are generally referred to, co-operated closely with the CV.

Schematically one might define the following factions in the course of the first half of the twentieth century:

Theological Persuasion	Old-Modernists	Mal-contents	Liberal Groninger-Evangelicals	Conserv. Groninger-Evangelicals	Young Ethicals
Factional Association	Association for Liberal Hervormden				
Typically referred to as	Liberals			Evangelicals	Ethicals

Theological Persuasion	Evangelical Confessionals	Kohlbruggianen	Juridical Confessionals	<i>Gereformeerden</i>	Traditional Calvinists
Factional Association	<i>Confessionele Vereniging</i>	Friends of Kohlbrugge	<i>Gereformeerde Bond</i>		
Typically referred to as	<i>Confessionelen</i>		<i>Gereformeerde Bonders</i>		

2.10.1.2 THE GKN⁴³⁶

The GKN was formed in 1892 when the NDGKN and the bulk of the CGKN merged into one association of churches. The merger was achieved primarily at a national level; local congregations took their time to merge. In many places there were two churches, an 'A' church and a 'B' church. The 'A' church was originally a Secession church, the 'B' church a Doleantie church. In general the A-group tended to be more traditionalist and experiential, whereas the B-group tended to be more rationalist. There were also cultural differences, the A-group tending to be from lower classes in society than the B-group. The GKN was served by two theological training centres, the ecclesiastical seminary in Kampen with its roots in the Secession, and the Free University in Amsterdam created by Kuyper. The GKN adopted CO-1619 and thus also FS-1619. With close to four-hundred thousand members, it comprised at its origin roughly eight percent of the Dutch Protestant population.⁴³⁷

In the course of the first half of the twentieth century, a movement arose within the GKN not truly affiliated to either the A or B group. It has been dubbed *Beweging der Jongeren* (The Movement of the Young) and could be characterized as resistance against a spirit of conservatism and externalization.⁴³⁸ This movement clashed frequently with the establishment, as this establishment followed in the footsteps of A. Kuyper and allegedly helped develop his theology. This factionalism resulted in two church schisms, the first in the late 1920s leading to the formation of the GKN(HV) (2.10.2.2.4), and the second during the mid 1940s leading to the formation of the GKN(v) (2.10.2.2.7).

2.10.1.3 THE CGKN⁴³⁹

Initially three congregations of the CGKN refused to be part of the union in 1892. They had serious doubts about A. Kuyper's view of the church. These three congregations re-constituted the CGKN in 1892. During the following decades, groups within the GKN crossed over to the CGKN, and thus it quickly grew into a sizeable association of churches.⁴⁴⁰ The CGKN might be characterized as more experiential than the GKN. With respect to confessional subscription, the CGKN and the GKN held the same position. Because the CGKN had lost Kampen seminary to the GKN, it established a new seminary, which since 1919 has been located in Apeldoorn.

2.10.1.4 THE *GEREFORMEERDE GEMEENTEN*

There existed throughout The Netherlands all manner of independent congregations and small associations of congregations that shared a tendency towards hyper-Calvinism, experientialism, and traditionalism. They generally had their roots in the Secession of 1834, or more local schisms thereafter. The story has already been recounted of the CAGK and the *Kruisgezinden*, from which the CGKN was born in 1869.

A third group consisted of churches primarily in the south-west of The Netherlands, united around the figure of Rev. L. G. C. Ledeboer; they were generally known as the *Ledeboerianen*.⁴⁴¹

⁴³⁶ For a general history of the GKN during this period see Endedijk, *GKN* volumes 1 and 2. For English material see Van Oene, *Patrimony Profile*, 156-239 and Bouma, *1834-1892*.

⁴³⁷ Vree notes that in 1889 a census counted 189 251 *Christelijke Gereformeerden* and 181 017 *Nederduits Gereformeerden* Vree, "Citadel", 117. The 1889 census counted 2 194 619 *Nederlands Hervormd*. These statistics can be accessed via www.volkstellingen.nl (the data comes from *Indeeling der werkelijke bevolking naar de kerkelijke gezindten voor iedere provincie en voor het rijk, vijfde gedeelte*, 114-115).

⁴³⁸ Bouma, "Van 'Vereniging' tot nieuwe wederkeer", 16.

⁴³⁹ Van 't Spijker, "Geschiedenis CGKN", 9-111.

⁴⁴⁰ During the census of 1899, there were 54 629 CGKN members and 361 129 GKN members (www.volkstellingen.nl).

⁴⁴¹ On the history of the Ledeboerianen see Hofman, *Ledeboerianen en Kruisgezinden*. Ledeboer was deposed in the NHK in 1841. Subsequent to his deposition he joined the CAGK but soon parted ways with them.

In 1907, they united together with *Kruisgezinden* that had not participated in the union of 1869 and with a number of individual churches to form the *Gereformeerde Gemeenten in Nederland en Noord Amerika* (GGNNA—Reformed Congregations in The Netherlands and North America). A number of congregations did not join in 1907 on account of freedom given with respect to the Psalter and the dress code for ministers. These formed the *Oud Gereformeerde Gemeenten* (OGG—Old Reformed Congregations). In 1948, a group of churches that had existed since 1922 as the *Federatie van Oud Gereformeerde Gemeenten* (FOGG - Federation of Old Reformed Congregations) merged with the OGG.⁴⁴² In general, the OGG tend to be more hyper-Calvinist than the GGNNA. With respect to confessional subscription, theoretically speaking the position of the GGNNA and OGG was identical to that of the GKN and CGKN. In practice these churches inclined more to literal subscription and had a tendency to bind to more than only what the confessions outlined.

2.10.1.5 SUMMARY

In the course of the first half of the twentieth century the following ecclesiastical parties may be identified: the NHK with a large number of factions, the GKN with the A and B factions and the *Beweging der Jongeren* over against the establishment, the CGKN, the GGNNA and the OGG. The GKN, CGKN, GGNNA and OGG can be considered to represent a more or less hyper-Calvinist spectrum, though it should be noted that there was quite a measure of overlap, especially between the ‘right’ wing of the GGNNA and the ‘left’ wing of the CGKN. Members of these four churches, together with members of the CV and the *Gereformeerde Bond* in the NHK, parallel what has been termed the Calvinist camp in the nineteenth century.

2.10.2 PUBLICATIONS AND EVENTS

The period between 1890 and the mid 1940s was rather unproductive for reflection on confessional subscription. Such reflection certainly continued, with the battles in the NHK being as heated as ever. However, little significant advance was made, and the positions generally remained as they had been since the 1870s. Within the GKN, a concerted effort was made to put into practice what conservatives had been arguing for during the course of the nineteenth century. For the GKN, the period up until the 1940s was a period of experimentation with the confessional task of the church. Hence there was also little change in the GKN in reflection on the role of confessions and on confessional subscription.

As a result, there are few publications to review in this section; the bulk of this review is taken up by developments in the GKN, first paying attention to a discussion between the *Hervormde* Rev. F. E. Daubanton of Amsterdam and the *Christelijk-Gereformeerde* Prof. H. Bavinck of Kampen in the pages of a respected theological journal (2.10.2.1). Subsequently, the various attempts within the GKN to build on the traditions of Dordrecht will be reviewed (2.10.2.2). In 1929, the *Hervormde* Prof. Th. L. Haitjema, a prominent member of the CV and specialized in church polity, published an article on confessions and confessing; this article played an important role in discussions thereafter on this issue (2.10.2.3). Brief consideration will be given to doctrinal decisions taken in two of the smaller Reformed associations of churches, the GGNNA and the CGKN (2.10.2.4-5). In 1937 Prof. K. Schilder of Kampen penned an article explaining his views on confessional subscription; it deserves attention since Schilder played a prominent role in the church schism of the 1940s in the GKN (2.10.2.6).

2.10.2.1 NHK AND CGKN: F. E. DAUBANTON AND H. BAVINCK 1891

In 1891, the Ethical Rev. F. E. Daubanton of Amsterdam addressed the NHPV on the matter of confession and dogmatics. His speech was published as a separate tract. To understand aspects of

⁴⁴² On the history of the *Oud Gereformeerde Gemeenten* see Hille, *Tweestromenland* and Hille, *Samengevloeid*.

this speech, an article on “The Structure of Philosophical Divinity” published by Daubanton in 1885 has also to be consulted. The *Christelijk-Gereformeerde* Prof. H. Bavinck of Kampen reacted to parts of Daubanton’s speech in the pages of *Theologische Studiën*.⁴⁴³

One issue debated by the two men was that of the relationship between the science of theology and the confession of the church. This matter is directly related to the question of how confessions come into existence, and had been debated variously during the nineteenth century. This 1891 polemic produced a new line of argument. The Ethical Daubanton defended the subjection of dogmatics to the church and, on condition of the confession being ‘fresh’, considered doctrinal discipline appropriate. On this score, Daubanton defended a conservative rather than the more liberal line found with Chantepie de la Saussaye. The *Gereformeerde* Bavinck rejected such subjection, arguing that both dogmatics and symbolics draw on Scripture, and that dogmatics chronologically precedes symbolics. This distinction between the scientific search for the truth and the ecclesiastical exercise of expressing the truth seems more Modernist or Apologist than traditional conservative. There are various reasons for this deviation from the traditional persuasional lines. The personal positions of the two with regard to persuasional issues form one reason for the difference: Daubanton was not convinced of antithetical separation between Ethicals and Calvinists, and Bavinck had studied in Leiden under the Modernist Scholten. A second reason is that their reflection was of a more abstract order: Daubanton was especially concerned with the ordering of the discipline of theology, and Bavinck was probably the first *Christelijk-Gereformeerde* theologian to reflect more abstractly than traditionally on theological issues.

Daubanton and Bavinck disagreed on the logical and chronological order of symbolics and dogmatics. Daubanton considered dogmatics to be the theory aimed at describing the reality of confessing and thus opined that confessing always precedes dogmatics, both logically and chronologically. Here is a typical Ethical emphasis of the act—Daubanton used the verb ‘to confess’ rather than the noun ‘confession’—having priority over the mind. With Bavinck it is chronologically the other way around. Dogmatics draws on Scripture and paves the way for confession. One may here detect a ray of intellectualism: only when a truth has been articulated can it be confessed. Logically, Bavinck argued that symbolics and dogmatics stand shoulder to shoulder: there is cross-influence but both are free, a stance previously held by the Apologist School. Practical consequences of the two positions are such that Daubanton held that only what has been ecclesiastically approved can be considered as dogma, whereas Bavinck was of the opinion that a thesis or proposition that enjoys general acceptance and authority does not require ecclesiastical approval to be considered a dogma.

It is also interesting to note how the two appreciated the confessions. Daubanton approached confessions with a view to the goal: they are drafts that are to be perfected. Bavinck approached confessions with a view to the past: they are the best we have and therefore to be respected. Though merely a difference in emphasis, Daubanton’s position leads to depreciation for confessions while Bavinck’s results in appreciation for confessions. It should be pointed out that in Bavinck’s scheme a confession is not merely an ecclesiastical document but also a scientific consensus with a certain amount of authority. If one accepts the full segregation of the science of theology and the church, it would mean that confessions play more than one role. Since this study is concerned with the ecclesiastical role of confessions, this line of thought will not be pursued further.⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴³ Daubanton, *Confessie en dogmatiek*. Daubanton, "Inrichting". Bavinck, "Confessie en Dogmatiek".

⁴⁴⁴ Bavinck himself made clear where he stood on this score when, in 1902, he transferred from the ecclesiastical seminary in Kampen to the Free University in Amsterdam. The issue of confessions in non-ecclesiastical terrain continued to be heavily debated, even within *Gereformeerde* circles, especially with the rise of the Cosmonomic Idea Philosophy (Dooyeweerd).

There are a few minor points to be made. In his speech, Daubanton spoke of a primary and secondary cause for confessing. The primary cause relates to confessing as such, the secondary cause to the motive for confessing and the form that confessing takes. Secondly, Daubanton spoke of three types: apology for external use, canon for internal use, and catechism for what remains. Bavinck spoke of only two: confession and catechism. A line can probably be drawn from Bavinck back to Kuyper's thoughts on the types of confessions. A third matter concerns Daubanton's view on revision of confessions. He spoke of three sorts: logical (the form of the confession), organic-confessional (the way elements of the confession relate to each other), and biblical-theological (the substance). It is the second sort that is of interest, betraying as it does the influence of Scholten's ideas concerning the formal principle of dogmatics. A fourth point worth noting is the relationship between confession, dogmatics and Scripture. As Bavinck remarked, in Daubanton's scheme Scripture is somewhat sidelined and room is given for something alongside Scripture (the speculation of the dogmatician, which, once accepted by the church, becomes confessional). Bavinck himself preferred to consider the dogmatician's task as one of systematizing the doctrines of Scripture.

In conclusion, the polemics between Daubanton and Bavinck revealed how positions on confessional subscription were in flux: the Ethical appropriated Conservative elements into his scheme and the Calvinist appropriated Modernist elements.

2.10.2.2 GKN: THE CONFESSION AT WORK AND IN FLUX

This subsection presents an overview of how the confession functioned in the GKN, instituted in 1892. Seven matters will be reviewed: the deletion of a number of phrases from BC art. 36, the revision of CO-1619, the decision of GS Den Haag 1914 concerning confessional binding for non-office bearers, the Geelkerken case, attempts at adopting an up-to-date confession, attempts at adopting a new instructional aid for catechizing, and disagreement about doctrinal matters not clearly outlined in the confession.

The order in which the various matters are reviewed may appear odd to a knowledgeable reader. They have been chronologically arranged according to the time at which each issue came to a close, rather than the time at which the issue began.

2.10.2.2.1 The Revision of BC art. 36

Article 36 of the Belgic Confession as originally held by the GKN stated, concerning the civil government:

And their office is, not only to have regard unto and watch for the welfare of the civil state, but also that they protect the sacred ministry, and thus *may remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship; that the kingdom of antichrist may thus be destroyed*, and the kingdom of Christ promoted. They must, therefore, countenance the preaching of the word of the gospel everywhere, that God may be honored and worshiped by everyone, as he commands in his Word.⁴⁴⁵

Within Seceder circles there had been objections against the italicized words as early as 1848. However, it was Kuyper who from the 1870s convinced many *Gereformeerden* of the inappropriateness of these words. Thus it happened at GS Middelburg 1896 that several advisors, asked to express their agreement with the confessions, submitted a *gravamen* in which they articulated their objections to the italicized words. The issue was also tabled at this synod because PS Groningen noted that some office bearers were subscribing the confessions conditionally. PS Groningen requested synod to ensure that the issue would be studied, and in the meantime to enforce unconditional subscription to the Three Forms of Unity. GS Middelburg 1896 decided that it could not prescribe unconditional subscription and so it was up to the classis to decide in each

⁴⁴⁵ Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:432.

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individual case whether a conditional subscription was permissible. The synod also created a committee to study the matter.

At the next general synod in 1899, the committee reported that it was not yet finished. At GS Arnhem 1902 the committee reported that it was unable to accomplish its mandate. It found it impossible to come to a positive statement on the role of the civil government. It also found it impracticable to consult with all foreign reformed churches on the issue. GS Arnhem 1902 narrowed the mandate down simply to advising the next general synod on what to do about the contested phrase in article 36. In 1905 the committee submitted its report.

The committee felt it had adequately involved foreign churches in the matter by looking at foreign reformed confessions. It noted that a positive formulation of the task of civil authorities was not possible since there were too many opinions on that score. Being of the opinion that a confession should be read in the sense the original authors had understood it, the committee indicated there were four possible courses of action, namely (1) formulate a new article of faith, (2) simply delete the offending words, (3) leave the confession intact and add a separate declaration, or (4) insert a clause with respect to this point in the form of subscription. The committee advised synod to follow option 2, and add a marginal note to the confession explaining the deletion of the words.

Synod appointed an advisory committee to advise it on the report. The advisory committee noted that all particular synods supported the *gravamen*. However, five particular synods objected to deleting the words. Three other particular synods suggested that synod express support for the *gravamen* but undertake no action until the time was ripe. The advisory committee itself was divided into three positions. The first supported the *gravamen* and advised no deletion, the second supported the *gravamen* and advised deletion, and the third considered the *gravamen* weak, noting that the questioned phrase could be read in different ways. Synod decided to uphold the *gravamen* and then voted 24-16 in favour of deleting the words in question. It was decided that the deleted words would be printed in a marginal note with the reason as to why they were deleted. Notice was given to the civil government of this change to the confession.

At GS Utrecht 1908, the matter returned on account of two objections to the decision taken by GS Amsterdam 1905. These objections were dismissed. Further, PS Utrecht asked synod to decide whether a positive formulation could be given concerning the task of the civil government with respect to idolatry and false worship. The synod decided the time was not ripe for such a statement, noting that the matter should be considered by the churches and “studied by men of believing science.” Discussion on article 36 continued but never came to anything concrete.⁴⁴⁶

There are a couple of matters worth noting.

First of all, the GKN seriously attempted to involve foreign Reformed Christians in their revision of the confession. Even when this proved to be impracticable, the committee managed in a roundabout way to live up to this imperative.

Secondly, the committee report identified the Canons of Dort and the Walcheren Articles as similar sorts of confessions. In fact, it considered all doctrinal statements issued by an ecclesiastical assembly to be of this sort. The implications of this for confessional subscription were not considered at the time. It is all the more curious when one realizes that GS Amsterdam 1905 also changed FS-1619 slightly by specifically listing the Three Forms of Unity. One might well ask whether the Canons of Dort should not have been dropped or the Walcheren Articles added.

⁴⁴⁶ With respect to the general synods see *Acta...GKN...* 1896, art. 41 and 179, A E 2; *Acta...GKN...* 1899, art. 41; *Acta...GKN...* 1902, art. 21 and 23; *Acta...GKN...* 1905, art.151, 154 and 155; *Acta...GKN...* 1908, art. 51; *Acta...GKN...* 1952, art. 480. On the discussion in America see Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 1:799, n. 2. See Van der Zwaag, *Onverkort of Gekortwiekt?*, 333-339.

Thirdly, GS Amsterdam 1905 considered deletion of the words appropriate, but both in 1905 and in 1908 the GKN considered it impossible to come to a positive formulation of the task of the government with respect to false religion and idolatry. Would it not have been wiser, then, to reflect on the matter further before changing the confession?

Finally, how should one read a confession? The committee suggested that a confession must be read in the light of its original context and considered re-interpretation improper. However, one of the members of the advisory committee felt that the words could also be legitimately understood in a more appropriate sense. The question is: how does one understand the confession?

2.10.2.2.2 Revision of the Church Order

With the re-formation of the GKN, it was recognized that CO-1619 would need to be revised. Varying aspects of it were outdated and some reorganization was considered beneficial.

Among the matters revised were CO-1619 articles 53 and 54. The two existing articles were merged, and article 54 was reshaped into an article prescribing subscription for elders and deacons as well as *proponenten*, though it was decided not to adopt a form of subscription for elders and deacons nationally, which was left to the classes. The church order was also brought into line with the form of subscription where it concerned the confessions to be subscribed: articles 53 and 54 prescribed subscription to all Three Forms of Unity. A difference between articles 53 and 54 was that the former prescribed the use of a form of subscription, but the latter did not. It would seem that it was not considered necessary to revise FS-1619, since FS-1619 and FS-1905 are almost identical.⁴⁴⁷

2.10.2.2.3 The Ordinary Church Member and the Confession

GS Den Haag 1914 was asked by PS Friesland (zuid) whether someone who agrees with the reformed confession could attend the Lord's Supper though he is not convinced of the propriety of infant baptism, but does not

GKN—CO-1905 art. 53-54 and FS-1905

53. The Ministers of the Word of God and likewise the professors in theology shall subscribe to the three Forms of Unity of the Netherlands Churches (which is proper for the other professors as well, and likewise the rectors and schoolmasters), and the Ministers who refuse to do so shall de facto be suspended from their office by the Consistory or Classis until they shall have declared themselves fully in this manner, and if they obstinately persist in refusing, they shall be deposed from their office.

54. Likewise shall also the elders and deacons, and those who have been admitted as proponent, subscribe the referred to Forms of Unity.

FS-1905

We, the undersigned ministers of the divine Word resorting under Classis NAME, declare sincerely and in good conscience before the Lord, by this our subscription, that we from the heart consider and believe that all the articles and points of doctrine contained in this Confession and Catechism of the Reformed Dutch Church together with the declaration on some points of aforesaid doctrine made in the National Synod held at Dordrecht in 1619 agree in everything with the Word of God.

We promise therefore diligently to teach and faithfully to defend aforementioned doctrine without publicly or privately, directly or indirectly teaching or writing anything against this doctrine. We also not only reject all errors contrary to this doctrine namely those condemned by aforementioned Synod, but we also shall refute and oppose them and help ward them off.

And if at some later time it should happen that we foster any different consideration or sentiment against aforementioned doctrine, we promise that we will neither publicly nor privately propose, drive, preach, or write such a view, but we will first reveal this view to the consistory, the classis and the synod so that it may be examined. We are always ready to submit with a willing spirit to their judgement, under penalty that if we act in a contrary way, we are by that very fact suspended from our office.

And if the consistory, classis or synod should ever on account of serious reasons for second thoughts, in order to preserve the unity and purity of doctrine, would wish to ask of us that we explain more fully our opinion about some article of this Confession, Catechism or Synodical declaration, we promise also always by this, to be ready and willing to respond to such a request at all times, under the same penalty stated above, reserving however to ourselves the right of appeal if we should believe that we have been grieved, during which appeal we will acquiesce in the judgement and determination of the particular synod.

⁴⁴⁷ *Acta...GKN...*, art. 62, 72, 82, 91 and bijl. XL and Xla.

propagate his view and is blameless in his walk of life. GS Den Haag 1914 decided it could not decide this particular instance, first of all because it lacked all the necessary data and secondly because a general declaration “that departure from a certain doctrine of the church need not be a hindrance for allowing someone to the communion of the church” was not desirable. It did declare, however, that there should be tolerance towards those who err in a particular doctrine “as long as it does not concern a fundamental truth, the erring person is prepared to be instructed, and promises to make no propaganda for his convictions.” The advisory report had indicated that the doctrine of infant baptism did not belong to these fundamental truths. The synod did note that those doubting a point of doctrine cannot serve as office bearers. The synod indicated that the church council (with advice of classis) should decide whether such is the case.⁴⁴⁸

This decision implies that the GKN officially distinguished between fundamental truths and non-fundamental truths within the confession. Moreover, this decision presumes a distinction between the confessional binding of a church office bearer and that of a church member.

2.10.2.2.4 The Geelkerken Affair⁴⁴⁹

In a sermon held on the material of HC LD 3, Rev. Dr. J. G. Geelkerken of Amsterdam-Zuid had left open the possibility that what is related in Genesis 3 might not, in all its aspects, be true to reality, since mankind in the dispensation of sin cannot comprehend reality in the dispensation prior to the fall into sin. He considered it possible that scientific disciplines might make clear that, for example, a snake could not really have spoken, and therefore he wanted to leave the speaking of the snake (and other aspects) to one side. In 1926 the GKN met in an extraordinary synod to discuss the matter. GS Assen 1926 issued a dogmatic declaration on the issue stating that Genesis 3 presented the snake and other elements as “sensually perceivable realities”. The synod decided that Geelkerken had undermined the authority of Scripture and taught things contrary to BC art. 4. Because Geelkerken was unwilling to recant his views, synod suspended him from office, informing him of this by means of a letter. If he continued to be unwilling to recant his views he would be deposed three months later.

In a prolonged session of GS Assen 1926, it was further decided that office bearers of the GKN would have to conform to the decisions of the synod. If they refused to do so they would be addressed with much patience. Continued refusal would lead to dismissal. Should congregational members make propaganda against the decision of the synod and persist therein in spite of patient admonitions they were to be refused admission to the Lord’s Supper.⁴⁵⁰

Dr. Geelkerken refused to recant and was deposed. Other office bearers were also deposed and several congregations withdrew from or were excluded from the association of the GKN. They constituted the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (Hersteld Verband)* (Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Restored Association)). In 1946 the GKN(HV) united with the NHK.

In some churches and classes of the GKN it became a practice to have office bearers explicitly subscribe the doctrinal statement issued by GS Assen 1926 in addition to the Three Forms of Unity.⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴⁸ *Acta...GKN...* 1914, art. 138 and bijl. XCVII. This decision was maintained by GS Haarlem 1973-75 of the GKN[s], (*Acta...GKN[s]...* 1973-75, art. 245) and is referred to in several reports and decisions of GS Amersfoort-Centrum 2005 of the GKN(v). Some of this material, including an English translation of the advisory report of GS Den Haag 1914, may be accessed via www.kerkrecht.nl.

⁴⁴⁹ Harinck, *Kwestie-Geelkerken*; see also Maris, *Geloof en Schriftgezag*, 29-31. Maris notes that much material on Assen 1926 is collected in a Masters study at the University of Potschefstroom, to wit: G. L. Kruger, *Die Kontroverse tussen dr. J. G. Geelkerken en die Gereformeerde Kerke in Nederland 23 Maart 1924—17 Maart 1926* (unpublished, Potchefstroom, 1991).

⁴⁵⁰ *Acta...GKN... Buitengewone Synode* 1926, passim (note especially articles 209, 210 and 219). *Acta...GKN[s]... Voortgezette Buitengewone Synode* 1926, art. 320, 360 and bijl. XXXVIII.

⁴⁵¹ As is suggested by a decision of GS Utrecht 1940-1943 (see note 453).

There are many interesting aspects to the Geelkerken case, and attention will be focused on two of them.

The first concerns the epistemological side. Geelkerken posited that it could not be known whether in all aspects Genesis 3 intended to be historical. To his way of thinking, scientific research might prove impossible some aspects of the report of the fall into sin. He therefore considered it proper not to say more than was necessary on the historicity of Genesis 3. He considered this not to be at odds with what the GKN confessed concerning Scripture. GS Assen 1926 took the opposite view. It considered Scripture to relate historical facts, and that denial of the historicity of any element in Genesis 3 is an undermining of the authority of Scripture. As such, Geelkerken and GS Assen operated on different wavelengths. One may question whether the issue related to the confession at all. Should not the issue have been the fact that Geelkerken undermined the confidence church members had in Scripture, and that he seemed to have too great an appreciation for the findings of scientific endeavour?⁴⁵²

A second point of note is the impact of the doctrinal declaration. In some churches and classes this began to function as a fourth Form of Unity.⁴⁵³ Although the synod had not prescribed it as such, its decisions concerning adherence to this statement, even for those not office bearers in the church, certainly opened the way for subscription. This raises the question whether such a declaration should indeed be considered to have confessional status. Incidentally, GS Amsterdam 1967-68 of the GKN[s] decided to rescind the doctrinal decision of GS Assen 1926, suggesting that even forty years later the decision was still officially considered binding.

2.10.2.2.5 Renewed Confessing⁴⁵⁴

GS Leeuwarden 1920 was petitioned by almost all provincial synods and by a local church to initiate a process of producing new confessional statements. Not that there were objections to the Three Forms of Unity, it was said, but that “the churches cannot be satisfied with simply preserving and maintaining that which they possess in their confessions.” It was noted that the existing confessions were archaic in their formulations and exhibited minor defects, though this was not considered such a great problem. For subscription implied agreement with the confessed articles of faith, no more and no less. GS Leeuwarden 1920 appointed a committee of five men to look at renewed confession on the doctrines of Scripture, the church (aspect of pluriformity), and the civil government. This committee was to correspond with inland and foreign churches holding the same confessions over the matters. The local churches were further urged to fulfil their duty in matters of a more local nature (e.g. secularization).⁴⁵⁵

At GS Utrecht 1923, this committee reported that it was no easy task to involve inland and foreign churches of the same confession. The CGKN had indicated that it could not participate, as there was no ecclesiastical mandate to do so. The committee questioned whether the *Gereformeerde Bond* should be asked to participate: in theory it subscribed the Three Forms of Unity, but its practice of cohabitation with other persuasions in the NHK made its position questionable. The committee had found it difficult to involve foreign churches. It suggested that an invitation be extended to all reformed churches to attend the next general synod of the GKN and to advise synod on this matter. The *Gereformeerde Bond* was not to receive this invitation.

⁴⁵² See Van Bekkum, "Geelkerken: Theologiehistorisch Perspectief", esp. 97.

⁴⁵³ *Acta...GKN...* 1943-45, art. 260; see also "Rapport 1971", 9-10.

⁴⁵⁴ Ubbink, *De nieuwe belijdenis*.

⁴⁵⁵ In the Christian Reformed Church in North America GS 1928 issued declarations on issues of secularisation (see Van Dellen and Monsma, *CO Commentary*, 253). The advisory committee in 1920 was divided over the issue and the GKN eventually chose to leave this to the local churches.

At GS Assen 1927, the committee reported that confessions are *born*, not *made*. It felt that some of the issues were not so pressing as to require new confessing. It therefore requested the synod to narrow its mandate. In response, GS Assen 1927 restricted the mandate to just the doctrine of Scripture (especially inspiration and authority) and appointed a committee of six members.

At GS Arnhem 1930, a draft confession was submitted, sometimes referred to as the *Arnhemse Artikelen*. The synod was divided over what to do with this confession, especially because some considered it to contain matters that should be left to the individual conscience. The synod finally decided that the need for expansion of the confession had not been proven, and closed the issue.

In short, the attempt by the GKN to update the confessing of the church had failed.

2.10.2.2.6 A New Instructional Aid

It is interesting to note how, in parallel with the attempt at producing a new confession, the GKN also attempted to adopt a new instructional aid, a more up-to-date version of the Heidelberg Catechism. GS Leeuwarden 1920 received the request thereto. Most petitioners were only concerned with a new catechism for instruction of the youth; one church also felt that the new catechism should be used for the afternoon services. GS Leeuwarden 1920 decided it would be good to have an updated instructional aid for the youth, but that no new catechism was needed for the purposes of the afternoon service since there was already room in the service for preaching on topics not touched on by the Heidelberg Catechism.

However, successive synods rejected all concepts that were submitted via the committee appointed by successive synods. Such rejection was not only based on theological arguments but also on ‘pedagogic-technical’ arguments. When GS Amsterdam 1936 again rejected a concept submitted it also decided to close the book on the issue. A concept submitted privately to GS Sneek 1938-39 was declared inadmissible.⁴⁵⁶

The GKN thus also failed to create a new instructional aid.

2.10.2.2.7 Doctrinal Disagreement—1905 and 1936-1946; the Liberation

Several local churches belonging to the CGKN had not joined the union of 1892, partly on account of various teachings of Kuyper. These teachings continued to be a divisive matter within the GKN. Some felt the issues being discussed were matters that could be left to the individual conscience, while others considered them to be of a confessional nature. The discussion became so heated that GS Utrecht 1905 issued a declaration that became known as the Pacification Formula.

The synod decided that the issues being discussed were related to the debate on supralapsarism and infralapsarism. It noted that, on the one hand, the Reformed churches had never rejected supralapsarism but that, on the other hand, it could not be considered to be the doctrine of the GKN. Such “deep doctrinal differences of opinion” were to be brought as little as possible into the pulpits, and during catechetical instruction one should simply follow the line of the confessions. Although a term such as “eternal justification” is not found in the confessions, it need not be considered to be at odds with the confession. The declaration issued by the synod thus became a compromise between the two views whereby sentences were constructed on the basis of “on the one hand one may say A but this does not mean that one cannot say B.”

GS Utrecht 1905 thus decided that the issues being discussed were not of a confessional nature. Because its declaration allowed room for both views (although it has been alleged that the statements show a bias in a particular direction) the synod implied that the matters belonged to the field of prophetic liberty. This is further evidenced by the fact that opinions on these issues were

⁴⁵⁶ *Acta...GKN...* 1920, art. 86, 115 and bijl. XVI; *Acta...GKN...* 1923, art. 104 and bijl. XXXIII; *Acta...GKN...* 1927, art. 31, 261 and bijl. IV; *Acta...GKN...* 1930, art. 156, 223, 270, 323 and bijl. LV; *Acta...GKN...* 1933, art. 30, 55 and bijl. III (here the ‘pedagogic-technical’ arguments played a vital role); *Acta...GKN...* 1936, art. 131 and bijl. XXVI; *Acta...GKN...* 1938-39, art. 131.

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not to be presented as ecclesiastical teachings: preaching and catechetical instruction were to hold to the confessions.⁴⁵⁷

The polemics continued and became more heated as time wore on. Moreover, as positions developed, the question arose again whether confessional limits were not being transgressed. At GS Amsterdam 1936, it was moved that the synod appoint a committee to look in to the matter. The synod complied, and appointed a committee of seven persons to study whether statements and publications were in keeping with Scripture and confessions on the matters of general (or common) grace, the covenant of grace, immortality of the soul, pluriformity of the church, union of the two natures of Christ, and self-examination with regard to the Lord's Supper.

This doctrinal matter did not return at GS Sneek 1939. However, another issue had also come into discussion. Ever since GS Assen 1926 had deposed Dr. Geelkerken there had been a discussion on whether a major assembly had the competency to exercise discipline.⁴⁵⁸ The provincial synods of Drenthe and Friesland (noord) tabled the issue at synod. A committee of five persons was appointed to look into the matter.

The two issues returned at GS Sneek-Utrecht 1940-43. The synod decided to deal with the issue even though Prof. K. Schilder of Kampen, one of the key players in both issues, had been forbidden by the German occupiers to publish; in 1942 he was even forced to go into hiding. The committee appointed in 1936 had submitted draft doctrinal statements on the six issues that were adopted. When asked whether candidates had to express agreement with these decisions, the synod decided that this was indeed the case. The synod further adopted an explanatory document (referred to as The Explanation) submitted by the committee as in keeping with the decision of the synod. This in fact meant that the doctrinal statements had to be read in the light of The Explanation. In a letter sent to the church of Enschede the synod wrote:

Although the declarations of the synod concerning the differences of opinion are not to be seen as a confessional writing they are nevertheless an ecclesiastical decision concerning doctrine and therefore are binding in character. As such they are to be considered binding for all office bearers in our churches.⁴⁵⁹

At GS Utrecht 1943-45 the matter was tabled again. The synod was asked whether both ministers and professors in theology should be asked to subscribe the doctrinal statements. The synod decided that those classes that had the custom of subscribing the 1926 decision should also enforce subscription to the 1940-43 decision. At a later moment it determined that subscription to doctrinal decisions is implied in the form of subscription, although where there is justifiable doubt an office bearer may be requested to express agreement explicitly with the doctrinal statement.

In the new doctrinal statements the synod had chosen the Kuyperian views to the exclusion of other views. Those who considered the Kuyperian views to be in error, even unscriptural, refused to be thus bound. They underpinned their right of refusal with an appeal to CO-1905 art. 31, which stated that decisions of a major assembly are to be considered settled and binding unless it is proved to be in conflict with the Word of God or with the Church Order. However, GS Utrecht 1943-45 re-read the term "unless" as "until", concluded that the dissenting office bearers were worthy of discipline and suspended many dissenters from office, of whom the most prominent were the retired Prof. S. Greijdanus and Prof. K. Schilder, still in hiding. Those disciplined and many others with them, comprising roughly a tenth of the association of churches,⁴⁶⁰ thereupon

⁴⁵⁷ *Acta...GKN...* 1905, art. 158. See further, Van Oene, *Patrimony Profile*, 223-239.

⁴⁵⁸ The discussion was known as the debate between "old polity" and "new polity", I will later refer to it as "autonomism" and "connectionalism" (3.1.1.3.4.2.2).

⁴⁵⁹ *Acta...GKN...* 1940-43, see index entry "*leergeschillen*". For the quote from the letter see appendix CXIV, p. 275.

⁴⁶⁰ In 1946 the GKN(v) comprised of 77 303 members in 215 churches (De Graaf and De Graaf, *50 jaar handboek*, 49).

seceded from the GKN and formed an own association of churches. This secession has gone down in history as the Liberation as it concerned liberation from synodical hierarchy.

This new association of churches was also called the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*. Initially the dissenters identified themselves as “GKN (maintaining article 31)”. As time progressed, they came to be referred to as the GKN(*vrijgemaakt*) (GKN(liberated)). The other GKN is generally referred to as the GKN, though it is often referred to as the GKN(synodical) to distinguish it from the GKN(v). Within conservative reformed circles, members of the two associations of churches are generally referred to as “*vrijgemaakten*” (“liberated”) and “*synodalen*” (“synodicals”).⁴⁶¹ Both the GKN[s] and the GKN(v) maintained a seminary in Kampen, still extant today, generally referred to as “Kampen (Koorndijk)”⁴⁶² and “Kampen (Broederweg)” respectively.

GS Utrecht 1946 of the GKN[s] was not only forced to consider the matter from a doctrinal angle—which led to a partial retraction of the decision of GS 1940-43—but was also forced to consider the issue of the binding character of the declarations as such. It adopted the following nine statements:

1. on account of the doctrinal authority of Christ’s church, every doctrinal declaration which explains and confirms the confession is by nature binding and this synod may only relinquish it if it is proven that the doctrinal declaration is in conflict with God’s Word and the confession; or if the synod has replaced it with another;
2. if synods should issue doctrinal declarations without binding authority, the door would be opened for doctrinal liberty;
3. if someone objects to a certain doctrinal decision, one should not request its binding character to be lifted, but should submit an objection, for it cannot be that truth and falsehood coexist with equal rights in the church of Christ;
4. the decision of 1905 with reference to presumed regeneration were binding because it is stated that these thoughts were in agreement with the confession of the churches;⁴⁶³
5. the decisions of 1926 and 1942 are of the same character, and thus also binding;
6. the special binding of 1926 and October 1942 have been proven to have been necessary in view of the situation in the churches;
7. the binding character of the declaration of 1905 (part 4) and of 1942 (parts 2-4) has been rescinded since they have been replaced by a new declaration in 1946, which, naturally, has binding authority;
8. the special reasons which necessitated binding in 1926 and 1942 no longer exist;
9. nevertheless, the synod calls upon classes, especially the examiners, to ensure that candidates are aware that they are bound to all doctrinal declarations of the churches.⁴⁶⁴

Thus GS Utrecht 1946 of the GKN[s] maintained the correctness of enforcing subscription to doctrinal declarations.⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁶¹ GS Amersfoort-Centrum 2005 confirmed that GKN(v) to be a proper way to refer to this bond in order to distinguish it from other associations of Reformed churches. *Acta...GKN(v)...*, art. 184. Because the acronym “synodical” has never been officially recognized, I refer to those that did not liberate themselves with the abbreviation GKN[s].

⁴⁶² Initially the university was located on the Oudestraat (the library is still there), hence one will also find it referred to as “Kampen (Oudestraat)”.

⁴⁶³ Te Velde writes that there was no subscription to the Pacification Formula (Te Velde, “Kerkstrijd in oorlogstijd”, 48). This is strictly speaking correct, but the above statement does show that even without a signature the Pacification Formula was considered binding.

⁴⁶⁴ *Acta...GKN...* 1946, art. 229 and bijl. XXVIII.

⁴⁶⁵ On the Liberation see Deddens and Te Velde, *Vrijmaking-Wederkeer*; Endedijk, *GKN*, 2:9-122; Van Dam, *Liberation*.

The Liberation is generally considered to have its origin in two issues. In the first place it was a matter of doctrine: the Kuyperian stance over against the Schilderian stance. In the second place it was a matter of church polity: could a major assembly exercise discipline in its own right, and did not a church have the right not to abide by a decision during the course of appeal if it felt a decision was against God's Word or the church order (CO-1905 art. 31)? Although church historians duly take note of the fact that the binding character of the doctrinal declarations was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back, there is little attention given to whether the binding character of synodical decisions as such did not form a third issue on its own. If one traces the development of the synodical declarations, especially how they are qualified, an ambiguity arises. On the one hand, the declarations are not 'confessions' but 'doctrinal declarations' or 'further explanations of the confessions'; on the other hand they are binding. This implies that the doctrinal statements are of the same character as the Canons of Dort or the Walcheren Articles. The question may then be raised: to what extent should the Canons of Dort be considered confessional? One may also ask: what precisely is now the difference between a 'confessional statement' and a 'doctrinal declaration' or 'further explanation'? The vagueness is well expressed by M. te Velde's comment that the doctrinal declarations functioned as a "sort of" fourth Form of Unity.⁴⁶⁶

The GKN(v), at any rate, distanced itself from the doctrinal declarations and did not make its own Schilderian stance binding, so that it is even possible for a Kuyperian to serve in a GKN(v).⁴⁶⁷ The GKN(v) did not, however, retract the doctrinal decision of 1926. Although not explicitly subscribed anywhere in the GKN(v), knowledge of its binding character has not been lost in the mists of time.⁴⁶⁸

2.10.2.2.8 Conclusion

It proved quite difficult for the GKN to implement in practice what Kuyper had outlined in theory. Doctrinal maintenance was a primary concern of the GKN, and it made a serious effort to exercise doctrinal discipline. On the other hand, it proved very difficult for the GKN to advance in confessing. Attempts to come to a new confession or a new instructional aid floundered after several years. New confessing seemed to have been limited to doctrinal declarations which, because they were further explanations of already confessed doctrines, were not to be granted the qualification 'confession' but were nevertheless considered to be binding, and therefore equal to confessions in authority. Was this inability to come to new confessing proof that such a moment lay yet behind a huge mountain, as Groen van Prinsterer had said (2.7.2.2), and the time was not ripe as GS Amsterdam 1908 alleged concerning a positive statement on the task of the civil government regarding false religion and idolatry? Was it because confessions ought to be *born* and not *made*? Was it because there was a lack of consensus on a doctrine to be confessed? Was it because a spirit of perfectionism prevailed, which made it impossible to come to a conclusion? That these elements each played a role is clear. Whether these elements should all have played a role is another matter.

One may conclude that the *Gereformeerden*, having formed their own 'persuasive church', were in some ways unable to practise what they preached. While confessional maintenance proved possible, confessional renewal proved too great a hurdle.

2.10.2.3 NHK—*CONFESIONEEL: HAITJEMA 1929*

One of the most prominent members of the CV during the interbellum was Prof. Th. L. Haitjema of Groningen. In 1929, he published a tract entitled *Bondage and Freedom in a Confessing Church*, in which he defended 12 theses concerning the confessions.

⁴⁶⁶ Te Velde, "Kerkstrijd in oorlogstijd", 48.

⁴⁶⁷ See Van Dam, *Liberation*, 21-23 where J. Faber points to an article written by Schilder which, in turn, refers to Kuyper's article on revision of the confession. The article is Schilder, "Binding":6-7.

⁴⁶⁸ See Van Bekkum, "Geelkerken: Theologiehistorisch Perspectief", 87.

Like many other publications already noted, Haitjema's publication makes clear that at the root of the issue of confessional subscription lies the matter of ecclesiology. He wanted to consider the church as an organic entity, not as the sum of individuals. Hence he also rejected any contractarian notions with respect to the church. Confessions were considered to be the constitution of the church (Traditional Calvinism), the accord of fellowship between believers and local churches (Juridical Calvinists, Ethicals), or the mission statement of the church (Liberals). In distinction, Haitjema rejected the notion of the confessional church (*belijdeniskerk*), preferring to speak of the confessing church (*belijdende kerk*). By this Haitjema meant that the confession is not the starting point but the end point of the church: the church does not structure itself according to the confession but structures itself so that it is in a position to confess. Because the NHK was a regulation church, no more than an administrative unity, Haitjema felt re-organisation of the NHK had priority over restoring the confessing character of the church.

With Haitjema there a recurrence of several old themes that were often considered to be dilemmas. Haitjema seriously struggled with these. For example, the medical and juridical pathways to enforcing the confession had parted ways in the 1850s when Ethicals and Juridical-Calvinists split. Nevertheless, there remained within the Juridical-Calvinist camp an awareness of the validity of the medical element; one can point to Van Toorenenbergen and Hoedemaker as proof. Haitjema accepted the dilemma for what it was, and did not attempt to synthesize the two (as, for example, Groen van Prinsterer had done). Instead, he indicated that both might co-exist. On this score, his approach is in form somewhat like Kuyper's organic and institutional view of the confession. The difference with Kuyper is that Haitjema emphasized the priority of the medical approach over the juridical approach, even questioning the extent to which the juridical approach might be implemented in this present age.

Another dilemma Haitjema addressed, albeit implicitly, is the character of faith. In speaking of 'the confessing' (as opposed to 'the confession') church, Haitjema emphasized the emotional and volitional character of faith. Although he did not reject the intellectual side to faith, he pointed out (in the face of rationalism found with Liberals and *Gereformeerden*) that confessing is more than assenting to a number of hypotheses. A confession is not the starting point for faith but the end point, Haitjema alleged, and confessions form the fences that make it possible to exercise true faith.

A third dilemma Haitjema sought to overcome was that of the subjective and objective sides of the confession. Haitjema noted that the confessional issue is directly related to the presence of God's perfect Word in the midst of sinful humanity. The confession is one manifestation of the relationship between these two. Haitjema resolved the problem by emphasizing that only believers could confess and thus reflect on the confessional issue, for in believers the Word of God finds a pure echo. As far as Haitjema was concerned, there is thus no dilemma.

A consequence of this approach was that Haitjema felt no qualms about defending the absolute authority of the confession of the church. In line with his anti-contractarian ecclesiology, he emphasized that binding to the confession is not a matter of loyalty. Rather, he noted, it is because in the confession the believing church echoes the Word of God. The authority of the confession is thus directly linked to the Word of God itself.

It is interesting to note that Haitjema considered the confession to be binding for all church members. The confessions are fences that make it possible for children (believers) to play safely (to exercise their faith). If the children stray beyond the fences, they are in serious danger. Thus confessional binding is not a necessary evil but an act of compassion. He further noted that confessional binding for preachers is necessary, for their task is to proclaim the Word of God rather than their own opinions. Notwithstanding, Haitjema did not state that preachers must

proclaim what the church proclaims even if they do not believe it, as Doedens had suggested almost a century earlier. Haitjema's anti-contractarian ecclesiology is evident here.⁴⁶⁹

Haitjema's publication can thus be considered an advance in reflection on confessional subscription.

2.10.2.4 GGNNA: THE DOCTRINAL DECLARATION OF 1931

On account of discussions with the CGKN, GS Rotterdam 1931 of the GGNNA adopted six doctrinal declarations on the relationship between the doctrines of the covenant and election.⁴⁷⁰ The exact character of these doctrinal declarations has been disputed. They have been termed "a focusing of the reformed confession" but are not to be considered a new confessional writing, being more along the lines of the Walcheren Articles.⁴⁷¹

2.10.2.5 CGKN: THE BERKHOFF CASE IN 1933⁴⁷²

Rev. A. M. Berkhoff, minister of the CGKN in Sneek, had certain opinions about the millennial reign of Christ and a dual resurrection. As these views were considered by some in the CGKN to be beyond the bounds of the confessions, the matter was brought to trial at an extraordinary synod in 1933. The deputies appointed to study the matter did not limit themselves to the views of Berkhoff but also examined other matters.

Thus they delved into the concept *analogia fidei* (rule of faith) as used in the churches. Studying the use of the phrase in various contexts, the deputies concluded that it is unclear whether the phrase *analogia fidei* is commonly used in the way Scripture uses it in Romans 12:6. Given its usage, deputies concluded in general it meant the following:

1. the presumption that Scripture is a single unity;
2. more difficult places in Scripture must be explained in the light of the clearer places;
3. while exegesis may not be dominated by dogmatics, it may not contradict the main dogmas found in the confessions.

Deputies also studied how the confessions speak about exegeting Scripture. Because the Three Forms of Unity are silent on this element of the doctrine of revelation, the deputies made use of other reformed confessions, namely: the Berner Theses (1528), the Doctrinal Articles of Bremen (1532), the First Helvetic Confession (1536), the Scotch Confession (1560), the Second Helvetic Confession (1562), the Consensus of Bremen (1596), the Westminster Confession (1647), the Confession of the Waldensians at Piedmont (1655) and the confession of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church (1883).⁴⁷³ Their research yielded the following findings:

1. "that the accepted rule is: explain Scripture with Scripture, so that that which is taught by Holy Scripture, built on its clear declarations, must be used to explain the less clear places; and
2. that one may not depart in one's exegesis from a certain rule, which can be found objectively in the symbols of the Church."

This appeal to foreign confession appears to be in line with the choice of Wezel in the sixteenth century to see the Belgic Confession as a 'translation' of the Gallican Confession. The approach chosen by the deputies also suggests that, to the CGKN, being Reformed entails more than subscribing just the six confessions explicitly maintained in the CGKN.

⁴⁶⁹ Haitjema, *Belijdende Kerk*

⁴⁷⁰ Gereformeerde Gemeenten, *Voornaamste Besluiten*, 7-11.

⁴⁷¹ Berkum, "Identiteit GG", 35 and Van Dikkenberg, "Eer", 112 respectively. The comparison with the Walcheren Articles is from G. H. Kersten, the main figure responsible for the union of 1907 and for a long time dominant in the GGNNA.

⁴⁷² See Van 't Spijker, "Geschiedenis CGKN", 98-111.

⁴⁷³ Their use of the confession of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church is intriguing, since the CPC was not an orthodox Calvinist church.

Deputies finally studied the teachings of Berkhoff. They concluded that he had not kept within the *analogia fidei* and, in view of declarations made by the CGKN in 1863, 1872, 1879, and 1931, advised that “Rev. Berkhoff be forbidden to spread his private convictions concerning the millennial reign and the dual resurrection in word and writing as the teaching of Scripture.”⁴⁷⁴

Having heard the report, the synod decided in accordance with the conclusions of the report. The vote was almost unanimous: one elder abstained “being in no position to judge the matter” and Rev. Berkhoff, himself a member of the synod, voted against. At this point, Rev. Berkhoff indicated that he was therefrom no longer a member of the CGKN. Thus no disciplinary measures followed.

The question may be asked whether it was proper for Rev. Berkhoff, a member of the synod, to vote on this issue. In fact, considering the synod was an extraordinary one, called for the very purpose of judging this issue, was it right to delegate him to the synod?⁴⁷⁵

2.10.2.6 GKN: SCHILDER 1937

In 1937, Prof. K. Schilder of Kampen published a series of five articles in *De Reformatie*, a general church magazine, on the right and duty of the church with respect to renewed confession. Schilder looked especially at the ideas of Karl Barth on confessions. The discussion was contemporary, as Barth’s ideas had been appropriated by Ethicals and Groninger-Evangelicals in the NHK. This publication is helpful to become acquainted both with the Barthian stance as understood in The Netherlands and a typically *Gereformeerde* reaction.

Schilder made clear that the *Gereformeerden* and Barth stood shoulder to shoulder in their opposition to Liberalism and Roman Catholicism. However, there were two points on which the *Gereformeerden* and Barth parted company. The first concerns epistemology: Schilder considered Barth’s view of reality Platonic. Schilder was not enamoured with Barth’s characterization of Scripture as a testimony to revelation, or with Barth’s definitions of ‘dogma’ and ‘faith’. The second concerns revelation. Barth held Scripture in lower esteem than did *Gereformeerden*, so that confessions were held in lower esteem, which in turn implied that binding to confessions was improper. In his articles, Schilder made clear that on this basis *Gereformeerden* should oppose Barth just as they had opposed Ethicals.

Schilder outlined how Barth, within his framework, saw confessions as temporary answers to temporary questions. As such, Schilder explained, Barth could not consider confessional documents to be standards in the church. Schilder noted that *Gereformeerden* had no qualms about qualifying confessions as *norma normanda* (a standard that is to be standardized), as long as one realized that a confession is a *norma normata* (a standard that has been standardized).⁴⁷⁶ Schilder thus considered Barth’s position on confessional subscription to be without substance.

2.10.3 CONCLUSION

The period stretching from 1890 to the mid-1940s might be described as one of consolidation with a little progress in reflection. The battles of the previous decades continued, but on the whole the positions did not change much. As such it is inappropriate to come to a full-blown analysis of positions as done in previous chapters, and a brief recap of this period must suffice, taking a little extra time to take note of advancement made by Haitjema.

The polemics between the Ethical Daubanton and the *Christelijk-Gereformeerde* Bavinck reveal how persuasional allegiances were not clear-cut. Daubanton betrays Conservative emphases, and

⁴⁷⁴ Deputaten CGKN, *Rapport Berkhoff*.

⁴⁷⁵ J. W. Maris informed me that there was debate at the synod concerning Berkhoff’s attendance; however, this debate was not recorded in the acts. He considers it quite possible that the debate was on the issue whether the judgement in the end would be on a person or on an issue. (Maris’ source is his father, who was stenographer at this synod, at the request of the recording clerk, Maris’ father’s father-in-law to-be).

⁴⁷⁶ Schilder, "Symboolvorming".

Historical Part

Bavinck at times works from Modernist premises. It appears that thinkers within the various persuasions were aware of the inconsistencies within their own position and sought to patch them up with elements from other persuasional positions. The polemics thus evidence that positions were not as cut-and-dried as they may have seemed.

Haitjema's publication marks a new turn in reflection on confessional subscription in more conservative circles. Haitjema stood in the tradition of Van Toorenenbergen and Hoedemaker. However, with Haitjema, juridical and medical emphases are not viewed so much as having priority one over the other, but more in terms of a synthesis of the two, even a rejection of the dilemma on certain points. Because Haitjema rejected a contractarian view of the church, his understanding of 'juridical' stood in a different framework. Confessional subscription was, in his opinion, not a matter of loyalty to a religious organization but of adherence to God's Word. In principle, Haitjema had legitimized a legislative approach to maintenance of confessions, which in a practical way brought Confessionals closer to Ethicals. Haitjema illustrated the role of confessions by describing them as fences for a playground, thus implying that confessional subscription is not a cold regulation but a compassionate measure. Haitjema also superseded the subjective and objective sides to confessions by noting that confessions are the product of confessing, and thus the two cannot form a dilemma. In view of this observation, Haitjema's distinction between the confessing church and the confession church may be considered somewhat ill chosen. In subsequent years, many would fall over this distinction, arguing that any confession church is a confessing church. Haitjema himself would have agreed, for the phrase "confession church" was not two terms but one term, indicating a church that was founded in accordance with contractarian principles with the confession functioning as the contract that bound together.

In 1937, Schilder reacted to Barth's view on confessions. For the Dutch scene, Barth's position on confessional writings was not new, the Groninger(-Evangelical) and Ethical positions being very similar. Barth simply provided a slightly different theological framework for their position by articulating a new perspective on Scripture and revelation. Schilder's article shows how *Gereformeerden* in some ways identified with this position and in other ways distanced themselves from it.

Most interesting for this period is probably the course of events in the GKN as churches attempted to practise what had been preached in the past decades. This experience gave a two-fold result. Firstly, the churches felt incompetent to achieve the desired outcome and thus delivered half-work (delete an element in a confession instead of replacing it), or left off taking action (no new confession and no new instructional aid). Secondly, the churches insisted so strongly on particular doctrines that it led to church schisms, in 1926, and again in 1944. The difference between 1926 and 1944 was that in 1926 the existing confessions were considered transgressed while in 1944 new confessional material was at issue.

The course of events in the NHK during this period has not been reviewed. It was little different from the course of events in the nineteenth century. Those elements that are important for understanding the new turn taken in 1951 will be discussed in the next chapter.

As such, the period 1890 to the mid-1940s might indeed be described as one of consolidation. With the exception of the *Confessionelen* in Haitjema, each persuasion settled more deeply into its own convictions and continued to distinguish itself from other parties. Consideration of confessional subscription during this period might be said to reflect the pillarization that was typical of Dutch society for much of the twentieth century.

2.11 A Wind of Change

The rise of Nazism had created the *Bekennende Kirche* in Germany. Dutch church leaders followed this development with great interest, especially when the Barmen Theses became widely known. In The Netherlands many, especially in the NHK, felt that the church was called to do the same. In addition, the Liberation proved such a bloodletting for the GKN[s] that many became convinced such strict confessional binding was not healthy for the church. It resulted in a resurgence of interest in the role of confessions in the church and, in its wake, for confessional subscription.

This chapter focuses primarily on the change of heart in the NHK and attempts in the GKN[s] to regain its balance. 1960 has been chosen as an endpoint since it is around this year that reflection on confessional subscription entered a new phase in the three largest associations of Reformed churches. In the NHK, the ten-year moratorium on doctrinal discipline ended on May 1, 1961; in the GKN[s] a more radical party gained momentum and doctrinally swung the church around; and in the GKN(v) heated debates broke out on, among other things, confessional subscription leading to a church schism in the late 1960s.⁴⁷⁷

2.11.1 THE ECCLESIASTICAL SCENE

The picture painted in the previous chapter remained the same on the whole. Within the NHK it became customary, however, to speak of three wings in the church. These wings comprised various persuasions. The centre of the church was referred to as the *Middenorthodoxie* (Middle Orthodoxy), a term popularized by Prof. H. Berkhof in 1952 to indicate the Evangelicals, Ethicals and Confessionals, united in their attraction to Barthian neo-orthodoxy. Whether the *Middenorthodoxie* can be considered a single persuasion remains a point of debate.⁴⁷⁸

The GKN(HV), excluded by the GKN in the late 1920s, merged with the NHK in 1946. In 1944 the GKN(v) broke away from the GKN; the latter hereafter referred to in this study as the GKN[s] though officially it remained known as the GKN. In the course of the two decades after World War II, leaders in the GKN[s] would battle it out over orthodox issues. First indicators of this debate will be evident in this chapter, and much of this story will be told in 2.12. For the GKN(v), the years after the Liberation were years of consolidation, with the validity of the Liberation dominating the ecclesiastical agenda.

Although it does not really affect the subject matter, it is proper to note some changes in the circles of the various *Gereformeerde Gemeenten*. In 1948 the OGG and FOGG united to form the OGG. The GGNNNA experienced a church schism in 1953 when Dr. C. Steenblok was condemned for teachings relating to the well-meant offer of the Gospel. This led to the formation of the *Gereformeerde Gemeenten in Nederland* (GGN—Reformed Congregations in The Netherlands). With reference to hyper-Calvinism, the GGN is considered to be situated between the GGNNNA and OGG.

2.11.2 PUBLICATIONS AND EVENTS

Most of the publications to be reviewed are drawn from prominent persons in the NHK or GKN[s]. First to be considered is an essay published by Prof. A. D. R. Polman in his four-volume commentary on the Belgic Confession (2.11.2.1), followed by a look at the introduction of the new church order in 1951 in the NHK (2.11.2.2). Attention will be drawn to writings of prominent persons in the GKN[s] and NHK: the conservative Dr. L. Praamsma (2.11.2.3), polemics between the NHK middle-orthodox Dr. H. Berkhof, the GKN[s] Dr. G. M. den Hartogh, and the NHK leader of the *Gereformeerde Bond*, Dr. J. Severijn (2.11.2.4); and finally the NHK Dr. A. A. van

⁴⁷⁷ With respect to events and publications in the GKN[s] I note that, in order to avoid duplication, I will not take note of the more radical wing as it developed in the 1950s. This will receive attention in 2.12.

⁴⁷⁸ See, for example, H. G. Groenewoud “Middenorthodoxie” in *CE(2)* and Praamsma, *Belijdenis*, 63-64.

Ruler (2.11.2.5). Consideration beyond the NHK and GKN[s] will be given to a publication by Dr. J. van Genderen of the CGKN (2.11.2.6). In conclusion, there will be a review of the GKN[s] Dr. D. Nauta's commentary on CO-1959 (GKN[s]) (2.11.2.7).

2.11.2.1 GKN[s]: POLMAN 1948-53

In 1948, Rev. A. D. R. Polman of Alkmaar began publishing a four-volume commentary on the Belgic Confession. In 1950, Polman was appointed professor of dogmatics in Kampen (Koornmarkt) in the vacancy created by Schilder's deposition in 1944. The first volume of his commentary contained an extensive essay, both historiographical and systematic, on confessions (his historiographical work was previously referenced). The same publication also contains his systematic thoughts on confessions.

Polman's exposition could be described as typically Calvinist. He defended a substantive binding⁴⁷⁹ and argued that confessions should be respected for their contents. He considered confessional expansion a possibility though probably not a wise move, and doubted that the church would be spiritually capable of producing a new confession, considering it a "very dangerous experiment."⁴⁸⁰

What makes Polman's contribution interesting is not so much what he says but what he does not say. Polman builds his view of confessions and confessional binding entirely on Scriptural data and certain doctrinal positions. In 1929, Haitjema had considered the position of the *Gereformeerden* to be founded on an institutionalized or contractarian view of the church. However, one does not read any of this in Polman's work: there is no reference in his systematic section to the confession as an accord of fellowship or an authority for confessions on account of a pact. On the contrary, Polman defended the authority of a confession via lines drawn from Scripture and a view of the church as God's depository for His Word.

It was Polman who in 1936 initiated the process that led to the doctrinal declarations of the 1940s. In his publication, Polman refers to this in an off-hand way when speaking of the 'Geelkerken' and 'Schilder' cases. He considers them identical and thus fails to realize that the Geelkerken case, from the point of view of the GKN, concerned a breach of confessional faithfulness, while the Schilder case concerned a breach of faithfulness to doctrinal statements which were declared but not proven to be confessional. At the very least, it is remarkable that Polman does not discuss the confessional status of such doctrinal statements in his discussion of confessional renewal and expansion.

What also makes Polman's contribution interesting is that in the decades that followed he distanced himself from aspects of Calvinist doctrine (especially the doctrine of election and reprobation) and played a key role in the GKN[s]' move away from strict substantive subscription in the course of the 1960s.

2.11.2.2 NHK: A NEW APPROACH

Factionalism, church political reorganization, and the battle around the Reformed confessional heritage continued to plague the NHK after the Doleantie. This battle reached a milestone in 1951 when the NHK introduced a new church order. Though it did not solve the factionalism in the NHK, in the minds of most it brought the struggle for persuasional cohabitation to an end and resolved the confessional issue.

⁴⁷⁹ He himself refers to it as "literal binding", but his description matches what I will later define as "substantive binding."

⁴⁸⁰ Polman, *NGB*, 1:44-103.

2.11.2.2.1 A New Church Order⁴⁸¹

Factional infighting within the NHK had reached such proportions by the 1870s that attempts were started to reorganize the church in such a way that the various persuasions might coexist. However, repeated attempts at introducing a new church structure failed. In the early twentieth century, the conservatives, led therein especially by Hoedemaker, decided that confessional renewal could only be pursued if the church was reorganized. Thus the CV and the *Gereformeerde Bond* also came with proposals to restructure the church. However, their attempts caused unrest among the Liberals, who published an anti-confessional declaration of principles in 1922.

When multiple attempts at restructuring the church had failed, the CV requested the Synod to mandate the ASC to form a Committee for Reorganization. This committee was formed, but its proposal was rejected. As a result, the Confessionals established the *Nederlands Hervormde Verbond voor Kerkherstel* (The Dutch *Hervormde* Union for Church Restoration); this organization and movement is usually referred to as *Kerkherstel*. Its members came from the *Gereformeerde Bond*, the CV, the Kohlbruggianen, and the Ethicals. Because of its confessional focus, others in the NHK established the *Vereeniging Kerkopbouw* (Association Church Growth); this association and movement is usually referred to as *Kerkopbouw*. Its members came from the Ethical, Groninger-Evangelical, and Liberal camps. *Kerkopbouw* was not a homogeneous body: the issue of confessions and discipline divided this body into a right and left wing.

Both *Kerkherstel* and *Kerkopbouw* submitted proposals for reorganizing the NHK. These also failed to gain majority support. In 1935, the two movements reached an accord for co-operation under the leadership of the jurist P. Scholten. In 1937, the two bodies together submitted a new proposal, even though it did not have the support of the left wing of *Kerkopbouw* (the more extreme Liberals) and the right wing of *Kerkherstel* (the *Gereformeerde Bond*). The proposal was adopted by synod with a typical vote of 10-9. However, it caused such upheaval in the NHK that it was not confirmed in 1939. Instead, the ASC was mandated to look for a new solution. This resulted in three separate reports, all of which were rejected.

Prominent church leaders then decided to change tactics. First of all, attempts would be made to involve the grassroots of the NHK—the congregations—more in discussions between the various persuasions. Secondly, a new ecclesiastical assembly, popularly called the ‘Great Synod’, would have to be created, consisting of delegates from the classes. This Great Synod would then draw up a new church order. This approach bore much fruit, especially under the guiding hand of the missiologist H. Kraemer. The standing committee *Kerkelijk Overleg* (Ecclesiastical Discussion) created ten task groups of which one was *Kerk en Gemeenteopbouw* (Church and Congregation Growth). Its primary task was to stimulate the congregations to be a church “in obedience to Holy Scripture, standing on the foundation of the confessional writings.” *Kerk en Gemeenteopbouw* in turn created a subcommittee with the name *Commissie voor de Beginselen van Kerkorde* (CBK—Committee for the Principles of Church Order). Those nominated to take place in the committee represented all the persuasions in the NHK, although it proved difficult to have all the positions filled.

This CBK wrote a series of church order articles that were appended to the AR. Thus the ‘Great Synod’ came into existence. This synod was referred to as the “*Generale Synode*” in distinction from the Hagian “*Algemene Synode*”.⁴⁸² This *Generale Synode* would then be able to do what was

⁴⁸¹ For documentation see Balke and Oostenbrink-Evers, *Kerkorde* and Balke and Oostenbrink-Evers, *Werkorde*. For a historical overview see Rasker, *De NHK vanaf 1795*, 269-275; Oostenbrink-Evers, *KO-1951*.

⁴⁸² Both “*generaal*” and “*algemeen*” translate as “general”. Traditionally national synods in Holland were referred to as “*Generale Synodes*”. It was argued that since GS Dordrecht 1618-19 there had been no proper “*Generale Synode*”, only the “*Algemene Synode*” which was not really a “*Synode*”. The term “*Generale Synode*” was used to indicate that the to be convened ecclesiastical assembly would again be a proper synod as GS Dordrecht 1618-19 had been.

beyond the competence of the *Algemene Synode*, namely take decisions with respect to the doctrine of the church. The primary task of the *Generale Synode* was to draft a new church order. Running ahead, Scholten, the chairman of the CBK, gave instructions to another jurist on the CBK to draw up a draft church order. This was written in the course of 1944 and early 1945.

In 1945—for The Netherlands the first summer after World War II—the synod approved the articles, and on Reformation Day 1945 the *Generale Synode* convened for the first time. It appointed a *Commissie voor Kerkorde* (CK—Committee for Church Order), consisting of the original eight members of the CBK, augmented by five other persons, all functionaries of some sort of the *Generale Synode*. Like the CBK, this committee spanned the breadth of persuasions of the NHK.

The committee went about its labours with much diligence. It decided to make use of the already-written draft church order, which went by the title *Bouwplan* (Blueprint), as a starting point. It became clear that the persuasions could not be brought closer together, and it was only with much pain and struggle that both Dr. J. Severijn for the *Gereformeerde Bond* and Rev. J. Boonstra for the Liberals were willing to place their signature beneath the final proposal.⁴⁸³ On November 24, 1947, this committee presented its proposal to the *Generale Synode*. After studying it carefully, the *Generale Synode* adopted it in first reading on October 14, 1949, with a vote of 39-3, and in second reading on December 7, 1950, with a vote of 76-14.⁴⁸⁴ On May 1, 1951, the new church order became operative. Hence it became known as CO-1951.

2.11.2.2.2 Renewed Confessing during and after the German Occupation

One of the main reasons why the NHK was able to make this about-turn at this moment when for over a hundred years it had failed to do so was the national situation. National Socialism had not only taken hold of Germany, it had also captured the minds of Dutchmen, including some leading churchmen in the NHK. In Germany, the Theses of Barmen had been penned as a confession, an act which NHK leaders considered to be a prime example of what confessing is all about, articulating one's convictions at a critical moment. National Socialism became a common enemy for all persuasions in the NHK and united them; even Liberals became convinced of the need for doctrinal discipline in view of National Socialism. Moreover, renewed confessing in Germany became an example that the Dutch readily followed.

The Theses of Amersfoort formed the first publication of confessional character. These were written by a private group of theologians and published in 1941. Both in form and contents they were rather similar to the Theses of Barmen. An attempt was made to have synod adopt these as a confession but, in the judgment of the church historian Rasker, the church leadership was not up to this as yet.⁴⁸⁵

However, in July 1941 the synod did issue a Pastoral Letter, which, though milder in tone than the Theses of Amersfoort, clearly condemned National Socialism as a heathen religion. For this reason the letter is commonly counted among writings of confessional character.

The taskforce *Gemeenteopbouw* drew up seven theses under the guidance of H. Kraemer, which were presented at an inter-factional meeting of the NHK in Doorn in 1943. These Theses of Doorn, also rather similar to the Theses of Barmen, were approved by those present from the various factions as representing the view of the NHK. Though not officially adopted by synod as a confessional writing, the Theses of Doorn were produced by a body with clear ecclesiastical

⁴⁸³ During the committee meeting where this took place Boonstra initially called upon the other members to convince him that he had to place his signature. Severijn signed with reservation of own judgement. After the introduction of CO-1951 he was one of those who challenged the introduction of CO-1951 via the civil courts.

⁴⁸⁴ The *Generale Synode* consisted of 45 members, one from each of the 44 classes and one from the Walloon churches. It had been determined that when the church order was adopted in second reading, not only the primary but also the alternate delegates would have to be present.

⁴⁸⁵ Rasker, *De NHK vanaf 1795*, 290.

foundations, and thus in NHK circles they are often considered to come close to being a confession.

Hence, in the face of National Socialism, NHK members rediscovered what it is to be a confessing church. Those closely involved with the writing of what eventually would become CO-1951 strongly felt the need to capitalize on the new confessing movement. Thus the CBK also mandated the *Generale Synode* to draw up a new confession. The *Generale Synode* appointed a committee to do this, and in 1948 it submitted its proposal under the title *Fundamenten en Perspectieven van Belijden* (Foundations and Perspectives of Confessing) as a “trial of renewed Reformation confessing.” It was particularly a product from the *Middenorthodoxie*, concentrating especially on the Kingdom of God with eschatological emphases. In 1949 it was submitted to the churches for approval. However, it never achieved confessional status, primarily because left-wing Liberals were principally opposed.

2.11.2.2.3 CO-1951 and Confessional Subscription

With the formation of the CBK, the NHK had admitted that its structure was essentially administrative and unsuited to an organization that considered itself a church. The primary motive for introducing a new church order was to restore a mouthpiece to the NHK by which it might fulfil its calling to testify to the Christian truth in the world. Though all factions realized the need for the NHK to renew itself, they were divided over how this might be done and what the final product should look like. The dividing issue was in one word: ‘confessing’—how is the NHK to be and remain a confessing church?

Most factional views were well represented in the CBK, and all views were present in the CK (the committee created by the *Generale Synode*). During the committee meetings there was much discussion on this and related issues. H. Oostenbrink-Evers has excellently reviewed the substance of these discussions in her 1997 dissertation on the principles and background to CO-1951,⁴⁸⁶ use of which in the following is gratefully acknowledged.

Oostenbrink-Evers’ first conclusion is that ecclesiology was determinative in the whole process. With respect to ecclesiology, she noted that during the 1930s Ethicals had come to hold a position closer to that of the confessionals,⁴⁸⁷ and that some Liberals had relinquished their view of the church as a general institute for religion. “An important basic assumption for both Committees was the idea that the structure of the church should agree with the Reformation concept of the church as explained in the confession of faith of the NHK.” What this meant is clear from the opening article of CO-1951: the NHK is to be a Christ-confessing church. The term ‘Christ’ implied that the NHK did not want to be simply an association for religious people, the term ‘confessing’ implied that the NHK had a message that it would declare.⁴⁸⁸

Because the NHK was to be a *confessing* church there was renewed appreciation for the confessional documents. It is interesting to see how the committees derived their principles from what the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism say on the church, though they felt free to add to this confession.⁴⁸⁹ The instruction for the *Generale Synode* in creating a church order was that it must act “in obedience to Holy Scripture and standing on the floor of the confessional

⁴⁸⁶ Her study is written in Dutch. However, it does contain a very brief English summary of her findings and a full English translation of her conclusions.

⁴⁸⁷ Oostenbrink-Evers, *KO-1951*, 68 suggests this is due to influences of dialectical theology but there were undoubtedly other influences as well. After all, already in the very early 1900s the Ethical Gunning and the *Gereformeerde* Hoedemaker joined forces.

⁴⁸⁸ With Oostenbrink-Evers I find it interesting to note that especially the jurists on the committees emphasised the need for the church order to contain theological concepts while the theologians (especially Haitjema and Van Ruler) considered this improper.

⁴⁸⁹ For example, the three marks of a real church (BC 29) are worked out in the church order and a fourth, that of diaconate, is added.

writings.” The fact that the phrase ‘confessional writings’ as opposed to ‘confessing’ is used is telling: the committee members were convinced that what the church confesses is formulated.

The CK also took due note of CO-1619 and its predecessors. It felt, however, that these were focused too strongly on the purity of the church and failed to take sufficiently into account the outreach of the church. Though all committee members were convinced of the need for the church to reach out with the Gospel, there was difference of opinion on whether this had to be regulated in the church order and, if so, whether confessional purity or the missionary task of the church should have priority. Though many argued that the church must have something to say before it can speak, Van Ruler’s stance overruled so that in CO-1951 the apostolate character of the church⁴⁹⁰ took precedence over the confessional character of the church. Thus CO-1951 article 8 described the apostolate task of the church, and article 10 the confessional task of the church.

In connection with article 10, the NHK decided not to adopt a new form of subscription. Instead, it adopted three questions to which candidates for the ministry had to give assent by means of an oral affirmation confirmed with a written signature. This subscription was known as the *Proponent Promise*.

The committees realized that being a confessing church also implied that those who contradicted the confessing of the church would need to be dealt with. Scholten had already indicated this early on in the meetings of the CBK. However, this committee made no suggestions to the *Generale Synode* as to how discipline might be regulated. The issue was thus initiated by the *Bouwplan*. It outlined a process in which supervision of doctrine and life

was strongly emphasized. Church visitors especially came to play a prominent role in the doctrinal oversight; they even had the task of equipping the congregations for their task. The CK felt that discipline should not lead to ‘Assen’-like situations (see 2.10.2.2.4). Supervision is therefore extended to the point of “excluding from proclamation and ecclesiastical education that which being contrary to Holy Scripture and the confessing of the Church attacks the foundations of the Church.” If supervision could not bring a situation to resolution, the path of church discipline might be followed. The committee proposed six manners of discipline of which the two most extreme were deposition from office and excommunication.⁴⁹¹ With respect to this Oostenbrink-Evers wrote:

Evaluating we remark that with respect to regulations for discipline Draft-1947 chose for a generous binding to the confessing of the church. The exercise of discipline limits itself to that which is contrary to the Holy Scripture and the confessing of the church where it attacks the foundations of the church (Ordinance 11 art. 6). Moreover, imminent exercise of church discipline is preceded by church visitation, an important instrument in preventing disciplinary measures. With this careful regulation the committee declared via Draft-1947 itself principally

NHK—CO-1951 art. 10 and ord. 7-18.3

Article 10.1

In thankful obedience to Holy Scripture as the source for preaching and only standard of faith the whole church, also in its official assemblies, in communion with the confession of the fathers and conscious of her responsibility for the present and stretching forward to the future of Jesus Christ, confession of the self-revelation of the Triune God.

Ordinance 7-18.3

Do you promise in all of your official work to proclaim Christ Jesus as directed by the Holy Gospel, therewith remaining in the way of the confessing of the Church?

Are you wholeheartedly prepared, to labour diligently and faithfully in the Nederlandsche Hervormde Kerk, as the manifestation of the one, holy catholic or general Christian church?

Are you prepared to submit yourself to the rules set in the order of the Church for her apostolate and confessing, her life and work?

⁴⁹⁰ The term “apostolate” is used to cover foreign mission, home mission, and Christian activities in the world such as the advising of civil authorities. The term, incidentally, was introduced to the church order by the rightwing Liberal De Vos (Oostenbrink-Evers, *KO-1951*, 202).

⁴⁹¹ It is with respect to this regulation that the rift between rightwing and leftwing liberals became clear: De Vos supported the measure while Boonstra objected strongly.

Historical Part

in favour of justicial⁴⁹² doctrinal discipline in the NHK. Therewith it took a decision in a great ecclesiastical point of dispute which had manifested itself since the introduction of AR-1816 and it made a principle end to existing doctrinal freedom.⁴⁹³

Another driving force behind CO-1951 was that of ecumenicity. Within the context of drafting CO-1951 the CK met with various other Protestant groups in The Netherlands to see if mergers would be possible. As a result of such talks, the GKN(HV) merged with the NHK. The committee also met with representatives of the GKN[s].⁴⁹⁴ Their main criticism of Draft-1947 was its stance on the confessions: the GKN[s] representatives saw no practical difference between the new formulation and the old ‘spirit and main substance’ formulation. Committee member Severijn indicated he shared the concerns of the GKN[s] representatives.

2.11.2.2.4 Conclusion

Structurally, the introduction of CO-1951 ‘Dortianized’ the NHK. Its synod was again representative and competent to deal with doctrinal issues. The NHK was also desirous to fulfil its mandate to confess. However, its substantial bond with the Reformed confessions had become weak and there was no desire within the NHK as a whole to return to those confessions in a substantial sense. Thus effectively there was no change in the type of binding: the NHK continued to practice essential subscription without defining the essence of what was subscribed. That the NHK was of good intent is clear also from the fact that it regulated a procedure for doctrinal discipline. However, execution of these procedures were stayed for ten years, and even after those ten years the NHK was not able to practise what it had regulated.

In short, the NHK had theoretically become a more confessionally defined church. In practice, however, it continued to be the factionally divided multi-coloured organization it had been for over a century.

2.11.2.3 GKN[s]: PRAAMSMA 1952

In 1952, Rev. Dr. L. Praamsma of Groningen published a book entitled *The Confession in Crisis*. In it he dealt with a number of relevant questions on the confessional issue, some of a more historiographical nature and some of a more systematic nature. His first chapter is of particular relevance for this study. The following three chapters are valuable as well because of their historical and systematic character. The last five chapters are detailed comments on the contemporary situation, and have proven to be of less interest for this present study.

Praamsma’s defence of confessional subscription is typically Juridical-Calvinist. Although he does not systematically state his stance, his position on various aspects of confessional subscription only make sense in the context of substantive binding. It must be said, however, that Praamsma’s insistence upon revision of the confession does give the impression of a form of perfectionism, which would in the end allow for a binding that tends towards literal.

⁴⁹² On the term ‘justicial’ see note 539.

⁴⁹³ Oostenbrink-Evers, *KO-1951*, 211. The final line of the conclusion—that the committee’s decision “made a principle end to existing doctrinal freedom”—is not worded clearly. Principally speaking there had been no doctrinal freedom for (a) it had been clearly stated in 1816 that the doctrine of the church was to remain intact and (b) the NHK had never rescinded its mandate to maintain its doctrine. What does not exist principally cannot come to a principle end. Nevertheless, it is true that doctrinal freedom existed, even by admission of NHK synods. I believe that Oostenbrink-Evers wanted to say that the committee principally made an end to existing doctrinal freedom (i.e. the adjective should have been an adverb: “it made a principle end” should be “it principally made an end”).—On the concept “justicial doctrinal discipline” see 2.12.2.7.4.

⁴⁹⁴ Oostenbrink-Evers notes comments from D. Nauta, G. M. den Hartogh and L. Praamsma during these discussions. Nauta and Den Hartogh were GKN[s] professors of church polity in Amsterdam and Kampen respectively. I do not know whether other GKN[s] people were present. It is noteworthy that these three represented what later would be the more conservative flank of the GKN[s].

It is clear that ecclesiological presuppositions play a determinative role in the issue of confessional subscription for Praamsma. His polemicizing with prominent NHK leaders especially indicates this. According to Praamsma, the NHK were too 'loose' in their view of the church, while the GKN(v) were too 'strict'. While his view of the NHK makes sense given the history of the NHK in relation to confessional subscription since 1816, this view of the GKN(v) is rather surprising. Did not the GKN, later GKN[s], bind the churches to more than the confessions, and did not the GKN(v) members liberate themselves from this undue binding? Did not the GKN[s] and GKN(v) share the same ecclesiology, and should not the GKN(v) be considered the 'looser' party during the course of the Liberation?

Praamsma made a serious attempt to overcome various dilemmas associated with the issue of confessional subscription. He saw this especially in the concept of the confession as static or dynamic, a formulation that paralleled Haitjema's concern about the church being confession or confessing. Much like Groen van Prinsterer a century earlier, Praamsma made clear that these two positions did not form a dilemma but are the result of overemphasis. Nevertheless, Praamsma has done Haitjema something of an injustice on this point: Haitjema's definition of a 'confession church' is somewhat caricatured by Praamsma.⁴⁹⁵

2.11.2.4 NHK AND GKN[S]: BERKHOF, DEN HARTOGH, AND SEVERIJN 1953

In 1953, one of the leaders of the *Middenorthodoxie*, Dr. H. Berkhof, rector of the Theological Seminary in Driebergen, published a two-part article in *In de Waagschaal* in which he systematically discussed the authority of confessions. These articles were subsequently positively reviewed by the official denominational NHK journal for office bearers, *Woord en Dienst*, and became widely known.

Berkhof claimed that confessions are necessary for the church. An extreme form of biblicism either creates a church without a standpoint—for all may believe as they wish—or a sectarian church. A church must provide a summary of what it teaches. Where a true summary of the teachings of the church exists, such a summary has authority. Berkhof suggested that a return must be made to the original purpose of a confession: to be a summary and repetition of revelation as it comes to us in Scripture, always recognizing that it is the fallible church that is speaking. Berkhof came to the following three conclusions:

- a) the confession is more like a staff to assist in travel than a rod with which to discipline
- b) 'in communion with the fathers' is more correct than the old 'in agreement with the fathers'. Discipline is limited to those whose teachings damage the foundations of the church. These foundations have not been defined, thus in each situation the church will have to decide whether something is foundational.
- c) doctrinal discipline is a final word, which must be preceded by much discussion and prayer; the power of the system lies not in its logic but in the faith which the Spirit gives to the church.⁴⁹⁶

Berkhof's thoughts were deep and compactly expressed. They evinced a serious attempt to reflect pragmatically on the place of confessions in the church, and as such elicited much response from various quarters. One response that demands attention is the eight articles written by Dr. J. Severijn, chairman of the *Gereformeerde Bond* and professor at Utrecht, published in the official organ of the *Bond*.⁴⁹⁷

⁴⁹⁵ Praamsma, *Belijdenis*.

⁴⁹⁶ Berkhof, "Gezag": 287-288,296-297.

⁴⁹⁷ J. van der Graaf pointed out to me in a late stage of my research that also Rev. G. Boer crossed swords with Berkhof over the issue of the confession and persuasions in the church in general. For an overview see Van der Graaf, *Ds. G. Boer*, 255-265.

Severijn considered the confessions not to be “summary and repetition of revelation as it comes to us in Holy Scripture”—this is ‘external’ and ‘scholastic’—but as “expression of what the church experienced as its faith, a testimony to that which lives in the heart of believers.”⁴⁹⁸ Because there is an internal bond between Scripture and the living faith of the congregation, there is a bond between the faith of the congregation and its confession. Thus the confession is not a compendium of the main truths of Scripture but an expression of the life of faith of the congregation. If the confessions are considered a compendium of the main truths of revelation, theology would dominate over faith, Severijn argued. Theology is the fruit of faith, not its source. Those who theologize directly from Scripture, Severijn wrote, theologize subjectively, not from the faith of the church.⁴⁹⁹

Another article worthy of attention is that by Dr. G. M. den Hartogh, professor in church polity at Kampen (Koorndijk), in a journal for office bearers in the GKN[s]. Den Hartogh defended the typical Calvinist line of thought found among *Gereformeerden*.⁵⁰⁰

The following matters from this debate have been distilled for the purposes of this present study.

Berkhof considered the confessions primarily summaries of Scripture. Severijn strongly objected to this, being of the opinion that if confessions were characterized as summaries of Scripture, it would mean that theology would overrule faith.

The phenomenon of *gravamina* is questioned by Berkhof and defended by Den Hartogh. Berkhof alleged that *gravamina* could give the impression that confessions are ‘perfect’ documents and obscure the human element in confessions. On the other hand, Den Hartogh opined that the phenomenon existed not for the perfection of confessions but to ensure that individual confessors and the church concurred.

Berkhof considered the normative element in confessions to be the invitation to confess as the fathers had done. Severijn took exception to this: confessing in communion with the fathers means confessing in agreement with the fathers: the normative element in the confessions is substantive. On this score, Den Hartogh noted that the phrasing of CO-1951 was no better than the ‘spirit and main substance’ of the nineteenth century. Berkhof’s opinion proves that CO-1951 had effectively changed nothing in the NHK.

Berkhof pointed to the debate between the two GKN[s] theologians Berkouwer and Praamsma on the objective and subjective sides to the confession. Berkhof makes the point that trying to separate the objective and subjective aspects in a confession is itself a subjective matter. In response, Den Hartogh pointed out that it is the church that possesses the confession and decides what is subjective and what is objective.⁵⁰¹

Another contentious issue is the tension between ‘maintenance of confessions’ and ‘repeatedly confessing anew’. One can understand ‘anew’ in two ways here. It could refer to a new way of looking at an issue (maybe even at odds with how the church looked at it before), or it could refer to the formulation of a confession on a point not previously addressed in a confession. Berkhof tended towards the former whereas Severijn limited new confessing exclusively to the latter. It means that Severijn considered the substance of the confessions inviolable, while Berkhof did not.

⁴⁹⁸ This later became known as “*religie der belijdenis*” (“the religion of the confession”).

⁴⁹⁹ Severijn, “Gezag”: 234-235, 242-243, 250-251, 258-259, 266-267, 274-275, 282-283, 290-291.

⁵⁰⁰ Den Hartogh, “Gezag”: 9-11, 22-25, 39-41, 57-59, 70-72.

⁵⁰¹ I note at this stage that I will not be reviewing the polemics Praamsma-Berkouwer to which Berkhof refers. Praamsma’s position has been reviewed already and was no different from that of Den Hartogh. Berkouwer’s position became the more prominent view in the GKN[s] and will be reviewed at a later moment. I do wish to note, however, that Berkhof probably overstates the case that the GKN[s] had already followed the line of Berkouwer. CO-1959 had not changed the character of confessional subscription in the GKN[s]. The overruling stance in the GKN[s] is also articulated by Den Hartogh.

Berkhof concluded that at every juncture the church must decide what is foundational for the faith. In the context of the NHK, this is a remarkable statement for, as Severijn asked, what is the church? Severijn limited it to the true believers, those who hold to what the church confessed, which implies that at any juncture the confession would always be judged correct. On this score, it is noticeable that even in the circles of the *Gereformeerde Bond* old Ethical emphases were present.

On analysis, Berkhof's stance is a combination of attitudinal subscription and juridical binding. Den Hartogh's stance is a typical example of Juridical Calvinist substantive subscription. Severijn's position is more difficult to catch in a few phrases. It is clear that Severijn also defended substantive subscription. However, he differed from Den Hartogh particularly in the characterization of the confession, portraying a distinction not unlike that which distinguished juridical and medical Calvinists in the early nineteenth century. Severijn and Den Hartogh differed in their ecclesiology, and the priority which ecclesiology should have.

2.11.2.5 NHK - MIDDENORTHODOXIE: VAN RULER 1955

One of the key players in reflection on confessional subscription in *Hervormde* circles was Dr. A. A. van Ruler of Utrecht, representative of the more conservative wing of the *Middenorthodoxie*. His ideas were already influential in the writing of CO-1951. In 1955, Van Ruler published a succinct and direct booklet on the role of confessions, entitled *How do the confessions function?* This publication makes clear that many of Van Ruler's ideas had been translated into regulations in CO-1951.

According to Van Ruler, the grammatical subject of confessing is the church as body of Christ, the "historical, communal, organic-institutional, divine-human whole" that confesses when people confess. Van Ruler noted that his stance did not exclude the individual, but took due note of the fact that an individual partakes in this confessing in an imperfect way; for as an individual human is simply a moment in humanity, so a Christian is simply a moment in the church. Thus while the confessing of the church rests fully on all church members, agreement with the confessing of the church is not a *condition* for being a member, but at the most a *result* of being a member. Thus, according to Van Ruler, appropriating the confessing of the church is not a prerequisite for being a member of the church, but the goal of being a member of the church.

Throughout his publication Van Ruler emphasized deeds over reason. He noted that the essence of Christianity is orthopraxis (right conduct) rather than orthodoxy (right doctrine). It is interesting to note, however, that Van Ruler did not depreciate orthodoxy or confessions as the product of rationalization. To him, confessions were not summaries of dogmatic formulas but a doxology; one might say a poem instead of a scientific treatise. Confessions could indeed function as a standard, though not for faith but for speaking or testifying. Adherence to a confession is thus not a matter of binding to its substance but to its mode. To Van Ruler, moreover, confessions were not a starting point but a goal. This necessarily implied that apostolate (being a Christian) must precede confession (articulating what being a Christian is). It also implied that church membership does not start with assent to the confession of the church but strives towards agreement with the confession of the church. Therefore, Van Ruler also did not consider the substance of the confessions sacred—even the Apostles' Creed could be up for discussion. On this score, Van Ruler advocated what will hereafter be termed attitudinal subscription.

Van Ruler further emphasized that the confession of the church is not a separate element in ecclesiastical life but a thread that runs through all the activities of the church. Van Ruler then also claimed that doctrinal discipline—judging someone's confessional faithfulness—is a necessity. To his way of thinking, however, this was a precarious exercise that should only be entered upon with the utmost of caution. For discipline is not a (contractarian) issue of excluding someone from a church, but of closing the kingdom of heaven. This last point is somewhat remarkable, since in Dortian polity transgressing confessional bounds need not imply excommunication, or even suspension from the Lord's Supper. Van Ruler's much stricter approach is probably to be

understood against the background of his rather Ethical definition of a confession. For Van Ruler, transgressing a confession is a matter of not acting as a Christian, rather than, as the Dortian tradition saw it, not believing the faith-substance outlined in a confessional document.⁵⁰²

Van Ruler's ideas, especially the priority of apostolate over confession, found their way into the structure of the NHK. Thus the ideas advocated in the past by Ethicals had in theory been victorious over the other persuasions in the church. However, as noted previously, in practice the NHK continued to follow what traditionally had been the Groninger-Evangelical approach.

2.11.2.6 CGKN: VAN GENDEREN 1955

In 1955, Dr. J. van Genderen, professor in dogmatics at the CGKN seminary in Apeldoorn, published a ninety-odd page booklet entitled *The Import of Confession*. In it he reflected on various elements of confessions and confessional subscription, a number of which are pertinent to this study. Van Genderen may be considered to reflect the *Gereformeerde* position without necessarily betraying a Kuypertian influence. He dealt especially with views prominent in the NHK, particularly that of Van Ruler. Van Genderen's position may be described as a good illustration of the Juridical-Calvinist position.

There are a few elements worth highlighting.

Van Genderen defended the static character of the confession in view of the static character of Scripture. On the one hand, Van Genderen admitted that confessions might be revised or augmented, though he considered reduction out of line. On the other hand, Van Genderen argued that doctrinal declarations could not gain confessional status, which means, given the context of his publication, that they may not be considered binding.

In contrast with Van Ruler, Van Genderen emphasized that confessions must be appropriated. Agreement with the confession is thus a prerequisite for church membership. Van Genderen also disagreed that apostolate precedes confessing. One believes, confesses and then lives the faith (apostolate), he argued. However, one should not imagine that Van Genderen took a rationalistic approach to the confession. Throughout his publication he continually emphasizes that it is not a matter of either/or but a matter of both/and.

Van Genderen understood Van Ruler to defend (what is hereafter termed) attitudinal subscription as opposed to (what will be termed) essential or substantive subscription. He traced this to a Barthian origin. It is true that Barthian perspectives had come to underpin the confessional position of many members of the *Middenorthodoxie*. It is worthy of note, however, that attitudinal subscription was much older than Barth: the Groningers in the nineteenth century had already held this position.

Finally, Van Genderen clearly defended substantive subscription. It is interesting to note how Van Genderen understood this substance. In giving examples of where deviation from the confession was permitted, he makes clear that substantive subscription was somewhat undefined among juridical Calvinists also. For Van Genderen did not appeal to an ecclesiastical decision to underpin his statement; the only basis he provides is common consensus. This raises the question whether the strict juridical Calvinist approach of substantive subscription actually does give room for such deviations. On this score, Praamsma's plea to correct the confessions on such minor points is probably more logical.⁵⁰³

⁵⁰² Van Ruler, *Hoe functionneert?*.

⁵⁰³ Van Genderen, *Betekenis*.

2.11.2.7 GKN[s]: NAUTA 1959-60

GS Den Haag 1949 of the GKN[s] considered revision of the church order necessary, and commissioned deputies to look at the issue. GS Rotterdam 1952 decided that revision was indeed required. GS Leeuwarden 1956 adopted the main revisions to the church order, GS Assen 1957 completed the revision, and on the first of January, 1959, the church order went into force.⁵⁰⁴ Though it continued in the tradition of CO-1619, the materials were arranged differently and the articles read more as judicial statements. This process of overhaul continued for some time, coming to completion in 1970.

The GKN[s] continued to practise confessional subscription in the tradition of Dort. However, it did more clearly spell out the rights and duties of the ecclesiastical assemblies in the exercise of doctrinal discipline. The church order was clearly revised in the light of the debates on ‘old polity’ and ‘new polity’ (autonomism and connectionalism) that had played such an important role after the Geelkerken affair and during the Liberation.

In 1959 and 1960, Dr. D. Nauta, professor in Church Polity at the Free University in Amsterdam, published a series of articles in a journal for GKN[s] office bearers commenting on CO-1959. He discussed the matter of confessional subscription when discussing article 24, presenting a very succinct description of the *Gereformeerde* position on confessional subscription. His views are worth noting because he was the church political advisor of the GKN[s]. Moreover, he argued along traditional lines in an association of churches that had already set out on the way of abandoning confessional faithfulness in this traditional sense.⁵⁰⁵

GKN[s]—CO-1959 art. 24 (later 26)

1. *The elders and deacons shall subscribe, in the first meeting of the church council, which they attend after their ordination, as proof of their complete agreement with the confession of the churches, the three Forms of Unity of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland.*

2. *Those, who have successfully sustained the preparatory exam, shall in the meeting of the classis which undertook the examination, give evidence of the same agreement by signing a separate form, determined by the general synod.*

3. *The ministers of the Word shall give evidence of the same agreement not only by signing the forms of Unity in the first meeting of the church council which they attend after their ordination to office, but in addition by signing in the first meeting of the classis concerned a separate form, determined by the general synod. Those who have not previously served in the office of minister of the Word, shall do the same in the meeting, in which they successfully sustain the peremptory exam.*

4. *Professors in theology and the other ministers of the Word indicated in article 16 shall upon accepting their task give evidence of the same agreement by signing a separate form, determined by the general synod. The same counts for all other ministers of the Word indicated in article 21.*

2.11.3 ANALYSIS

In the period stretching from the close of World War II to the beginning of the turbulent 1960s, there was a wind of change in the NHK. The NHK believed it had rediscovered its identity as a confessional church. In the *Middenorthodoxie*, Ethical and Confessional lines came together to create a church structure in which confessing was important and reckoned with, but was secondary to the apostolate. The revised church order of 1951 articulated Ethical ideals. However, with a moratorium on doctrinal discipline at least until May 1, 1961, the practice of subscription in the NHK was essentially that of the Groningers. Essential subscription had become attitudinal subscription. In actual fact, the definition of confessing as the expression of *fides quae* had been rejected. Astute juridical Calvinists, especially those not members of the NHK, correctly observed that, where confessional subscription was concerned, the NHK was no closer to its Dortian roots

⁵⁰⁴ *Acta...GKN[s]... 1957-1958: see “Kerkorde” in the index on pages 316-317. It would seem that this church order was never published separately (Nauta, Verklaring van de kerkorde, 37).*

⁵⁰⁵ Nauta, "Kerkorde": 101-105. Nauta's articles were revised and published in 1971 in book form as Nauta, *Verklaring van de kerkorde*. Note that in the book the reference is to article 26.

than previously.⁵⁰⁶ Van Ruler's comment that church membership did not require agreement with the confessions confirmed this.

The array of Juridical Calvinist publications reviewed in this chapter reveals how there was constancy in the plea for substantive subscription, although there were varying emphases. Severijn of the *Gereformeerde Bond* emphasized the subjective side of a confession, even at the expense to its objective side. The CGKN professor Van Genderen sought a balance between the two. Praamsma, Den Hartogh, and Nauta, key figures concerning confessional subscription in the GKN[s], continued to emphasize the approach developed by Kuyper, albeit with individual nuances. Though these last three reflected the official stance of the GKN[s], theirs was not the only position being advocated in the GKN[s], as will be indicated in what follows.

2.11.4 CONCLUSION

A wind of change had blown. Conservatives in the NHK gazed intently at the carrot before their eyes: May 1, 1961, when doctrinal discipline would once again be practised by the NHK. For the time being they kept their ecclesiastical peace, though they continued to defend their stance. The GKN[s] was still somewhat dazed by the Liberation, trying to come to grips with what had happened and why. During this period of bewilderment, Juridical Calvinist arguments continued to be defended. However, beneath the surface a struggle was brewing not unlike that which the NHK had known. The GKN(v) were so busy with their own identity that, to the outside world, they had become sectarian. But here too a storm was brewing with respect to confessional subscription. Only in the smaller right wing churches of the Reformed world was there little movement in reflection on confessional subscription.

GKN[s]—FS-1959

We, the undersigned ministers of the Word, resorting under the classis _____, declare sincerely in good conscience before the Lord, by this our subscription, that we from the heart receive and believe that the doctrine, which is contained in the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Five Articles against the Remonstrants, agree in everything with God's Word.

We therefore promise to teach that doctrine industriously and to defend it faithfully, without teaching or writing against it, be it in public or in private, directly or indirectly.

We reject all errors, that are contrary to it and shall oppose them, refute them and help ward them off.

We further promise that, should we in the future gain doubts against this doctrine or any part thereof or a conviction which deviates from it, we will neither publicly nor privately describe, drive, preach or write on this, but that in advance we will make it known to the church council or the classis or the synod, in order to be heard and examined by this assembly, always ready to submit to her judgement, on penalty of, if we should have acted contrary to this promise, being suspended in our ministries by the competent assembly.

And should there arise serious suspicions with the church council or the classis or the synod and should this assembly, for the preservation of unity and the purity of doctrine, consider it necessary, to demand a further explanation of our convictions concerning any part of that doctrine, we also promise, that we will always be ready and inclined to do so, on penalty as above, always reserving the right to appeal, in case of objections, during which appeal we will act in accordance with the declaration of the assembly in question.

⁵⁰⁶ I point out that this is not true with respect to the structure of the NHK. The switch from AR-1852 to CO-1951 meant a switch from a quasi-collegialistic structure back to presbyterial-synodical structure, and thus a step in the direction of Dort.

2.12 Subscription in the NHK and GKN[s] beyond 1960

In the course of the 1960s, the ecclesiastical scene of Reformed The Netherlands had become so complex, and reflection on confessional subscription so broad, that it is confusing and unsatisfying to continue to recount this history along chronological lines. In order to understand developments it is more profitable to follow reflection within certain circles. This is the approach taken in this and the following two chapters. This chapter concentrates on reflection on confessional subscription in the NHK and GKN[s] as two separate associations of churches. The following chapter will make clear that in parallel with this reflection there was a third course of events, which would eventually see the NHK and GKN[s] unite into one association of churches. The last chapter will review matters in churches other than the NHK and GKN[s].

The various parties that will receive attention in this chapter will be introduced (2.12.1), and an account given of events and publications between 1960 and 2004 that fall within the scope of this chapter (2.12.2). This will be followed by a brief analysis of reflection on confessional subscription (2.12.3) and a conclusion (2.12.4).

2.12.1 THE ECCLESIASTICAL SCENE

Because this chapter is limited to just the NHK and GKN[s], it is also limited to these two associations of churches in describing the ecclesiastical scene.

In 1951 the NHK had adopted a new church order, which brought its structure more in line with that of Dort. Further, the various currents and directions within the NHK were renamed ‘modalities’. A modality was defined as “a current in ecclesiastical life or theological approach, which moves within the boundaries of art. X of [CO-1951] and that has developed itself in a certain manner of preaching, of catechetical instruction and of being a congregation.”⁵⁰⁷ Thus groups of varying convictions ranging from hyper-Calvinist to Scripture-critical Liberal legitimately cohabited within the walls of the NHK. The church divided roughly into three groups, which might be circumscribed as the radicals, the moderates and the conservatives. On a scale ranging from Liberal to Conservative with the Reformation Confessions being the touchstone, this array encompassed Liberals, the *Middenorthodoxie* (composed of Ethicals and Barthian *Confessionelen*), Calvinist *Confessionelen*, *Kohlbrugianen*, and the *Gereformeerde Bond*.

Within the GKN[s], theological free-thinkers became increasingly influential and several leading figures advocated ideas that were not completely in keeping with what was perceived to be the Reformed heritage. Although one cannot speak of clear-cut factionalism in the GKN[s], it was clear to all that among the leaders of the church, especially the professors, there was a marked difference between the old and new generation. For the GKN[s], the 1960s and 1970s were a period of change in more ways than one.⁵⁰⁸

2.12.2 EVENTS AND PUBLICATIONS

This review will commence with a look at the actions of the NHK when the date (May 1, 1961) on which the moratorium on doctrinal discipline was to be lifted approached (2.12.2.1), and the reaction of the *Gereformeerde Bond* to this (2.12.2.2). Attention then shifts to two publications from the GKN[s], which made clear how here also questions were being asked regarding confessional subscription (2.12.2.3-4). Next will be reviewed an article from NHK circles on the matter of new confessing, of special interest since every attempt by the NHK to introduce a new confession had failed (2.12.2.5). Attention is then given to polemics between three GKN[s] professors on confessional subscription (2.12.2.6). Next is a survey of official GKN[s] policy with respect to confessional subscription between 1960 and 2004 (2.12.2.7). In closing is a review of a

⁵⁰⁷ Van den Heuvel, *Toelichting Kerkorde PKN*, 118 (n. 2).

⁵⁰⁸ See Endedijk, *GKN*, 2:205-227.

publication that emanated from a dissertation written in GKN[s] circles on fundamental and non-fundamental articles (2.12.2.8).

2.12.2.1 NHK: VERKLARING VAN DE SYNODE 1961

The ten-year moratorium on justicial discipline within the NHK ended in 1961. The broad executive of the General Synod of the NHK considered it wise for the synod to reflect on the confession of the church and its maintenance, and invited Prof. A. A. van Ruler to write a paper to this end. The advisory committee was generally pleased with the position paper, though it did have some major points of criticism. The committee felt the position paper failed to ground its position on Scripture or support its views with references to confessional writings, liturgical forms, or the pastoral writings since World War II. In addition, the committee pointed out that Van Ruler's paper fundamentally differed in its position on doctrinal discipline from the position taken by the church order: in the church order, doctrinal discipline is concerned with whether a particular doctrine is permissible in the Hervormde Kerk; in Van Ruler's paper, doctrinal discipline is concerned with whether a particular doctrine is permissible in the catholic Christian church. The committee also considered the tone of the article too hesitant, not making clear that there can be times when the church is not *permitted* to be silent.

During the course of the general synod, Van Ruler and the advisory committee redrafted the position paper. In its final version it consisted of sixteen articles spanning thirty pages in the acts.

The General Synod realized that the task of supervising the ministry of the Word and catechetical instruction (referred to generally as 'doctrinal discipline' though this term does not appear in the church order) is a task that the church should take seriously. In view of the fact that in the past decade the NHK had made much work of its task to confess, but had reflected little on its task to maintain its confession, General Synod considered it appropriate to issue a position paper in which the most important points are set down. The report was summarized as follows:

Chapter I: The functioning of the confession in the NHK

1. This functioning is a work and gift of the Spirit. We observe that the Holy Spirit causes the confession to function in our Church. We should not think that it only depends on us.
2. The present forces us back to the confession. As Christians we must come out. In the meeting of other Churches we recognize ourselves. What would we do with respect to Rome without our confession?
3. It is Holy Scripture which forces to confessing. The message of the Bible awakens in man confession as echo. We should give the Bible the room to do its work.
4. We ourselves must in our own time confess in our own way. Every era sees man in a different situation before the face of God. We should not repeat the fathers, but take their task upon us.
5. The confession of the Church is focussed on wholeness. Confessing is concerned with the fullness of the truth of God, the total tradition of the Church, the whole of Holy Scripture, life in culture and state.
6. We ourselves also have a task to let the confession function. Everyone is called to live and to work in and out of the fullness of the confession. Let each place her in the balance of discussion with the brothers.

Chapter II: Questions surrounding the supervision of preaching and catechetical instruction.

1. There must be discipline: not everything is permissible in the Christian Church. God has done certain things. The apostles and prophets have expressed these in certain words. This forms the life of a human being in a certain way. This gives the faith a certain substance.

Historical Part

2. Those who are the object of doctrinal discipline. Doctrinal discipline applies in the first place of course to those who in one or another form and on behalf of the church 'teach'.⁵⁰⁹ But surely the members also? For is it not they who confess? Is it therefore a hopeless undertaking?

3. Those who are the subject of doctrinal discipline. Christ is the Head of the Church. It is He who exercises doctrinal discipline. But He does so through the organs which He created for that purpose. These are the offices and the official assemblies.

4. Doctrinal discipline takes place with a view to the one Church of Christ and the Kingdom of God. According to its essence doctrinal discipline declares concerning a certain doctrine (teaching), that it is unbearable in the whole Church of Christ and cannot exist before God in His kingdom.

5. Be not too quick in excising novelties! Sometimes very novel and strange things emerge. This is possible: Holy Scripture has not been exhausted—the confession can be revised—whatever the case, the Church is not allowed to simply impose its confession, it should justify it.

6. Grant the opportunity to think about and express the truth in a different way! The confession is not completely fixed. Nor is it complete. It must be inwardly digested. It constantly enters into new spiritual situations. We reach out for the future. This brings all sorts of risks with it.

7. The modern era creates special difficulties. Our Church has for a long time been unable to do anything. In the mean time the world has changed enormously. Is spiritual life sufficiently strong and deep to do all this? Would people outside the Church understand something of this?

8. In practice doctrinal discipline is burdened by all sorts of less important issues. In general people tend to deviate from the substance of an issue to the legislative. Moreover, personal emotions and factionalism play a role.

9. A prerequisite [for doctrinal discipline, RCJ] is: have all things of God at the same time in view. The Church and the confession are focussed on the fullness of the truth and salvation. This counts also for doctrinal discipline.

10. Doctrinal discipline is not the main issue. The essence of the Church is, that it takes part in redemption and eternal life (the kingdom). This is what it praises God for. The confession is born from this doxology. In situations of need the Spirit causes it to reach for doctrinal discipline. In doing so it should not be frightened by the incompleteness, which it will be as instrument of the Spirit.⁵¹⁰

'To act or not to act', that was the question confronting the synod. The synod decided 'to act', but was so constrained in its 'acting' that what eventuated was 'not to act'.

Van Ruler was originally criticized for making doctrinal discipline a matter of the catholic Christian church, rather than the Hervormde denomination. It is interesting to note how in the final version Van Ruler's view dominated: "doctrinal discipline takes place with a view to the one Church of Christ." Thus the NHK decided that confessions (assuming these as the rule for doctrinal discipline) ought not to mark denominational boundaries within the church but mark the boundaries of the church itself.

In short, during the nineteenth century the NHK was officially incompetent to speak on doctrinal issues. In the mid-twentieth century the NHK received back its vocal cords. It learned to speak again. However, since it declined to back up its speaking with action, it was no more than a paper tiger.

⁵⁰⁹ Note that in Dutch the term 'doctrinal discipline' is '*leertucht*' and the term 'to teach' is '*leren*'. The article clearly linguistically links the two.

⁵¹⁰ *Acta...NHK...* 1961:32-35 (decision and first advisory report), 36-51 (Van Ruler's paper), 51-58 (first round of discussion), 158-165 (second advisory report), 165-172 (second round of discussion), 371-390 (final edition of the paper). Those that worked with Van Ruler on the paper were G. J. Streeder, G. Spilt, A. Faber and W. Zijlstra.

2.12.2.2 NHK—*GEREFORMEERDE BOND*: J. VAN SLIEDREGT 1961

On the occasion of the end to the moratorium on justicial doctrinal discipline, Rev. J. van Sliedregt of Baarn, prominent member of the *Gereformeerde Bond*, issued a small tract entitled “Ecclesiastical discipline in relation to the importance and function of the confession”.

This publication makes clear that the *Gereformeerde Bond* continued to be displeased with the official policy of the NHK on confessional subscription. Van Sliedregt noted that in view of the Smits-case⁵¹¹ he had no high hopes about the introduction of justicial doctrinal discipline: while the NHK synod might confess correctly it did not act correctly. Van Sliedregt had little expectation that it would come right. He continued to use the standard lines of argument to defend what has been dubbed the Juridical Calvinist position.

In passing, it should be noted that Van Sliedregt wrote primarily for a Traditionalist Calvinist audience. On almost every page of his publication, Calvin is quoted to prove a certain point. To an extent this colours his treatise. For example, Van Sliedregt’s position was not underpinned with discussion of ecclesiological or epistemological premises, which inevitably influence one’s position on confessional subscription as much as one’s position on Scripture. As such, van Sliedregt’s approach was not very different from that of Moorrees and Le Roy during the 1830s and 1840s.

2.12.2.3 GKN[s]: VOLTEN 1962

In 1962, Rev. H Volten, minister of the GKN[s] in Rhenen, published a 230-page popular study entitled *About the Confessing of the Church*. This publication well illustrates how a new position on confessional subscription was developing within the GKN[s].

In the first chapter, Volten considered doctrine—the teachings of the gospel—to be essential to the church. The church presents its doctrine in its confessions, in which it seeks to repeat (ὁμολογία) the teachings of Scripture. ‘Doctrine’ comes in two forms: as formulations of salvific truths (e.g. 1 Tim 1:10) and as formulations of commandments (e.g. Matt 28:19); thus confessions have a dogmatic and an ethical side.

In the second chapter, Volten looked at the confession as confession of the doctrine of Scripture. He noted that confessions do not express head-knowledge but heart-knowledge. Confessions not only express what the church *sees* but also what it *is*. They are not museum pieces: the present-day church is the subject of the confession, and thus a confession must suit the present day. In view of the fact that confessing also has a personal side in that one must come to appropriate what is confessed, Volten felt there should be leniency in doctrinal discipline. Furthermore, a confession is not a finished product but will leave things open: *theologoumena* and speculations are excluded. Because a confession belongs to all God’s children, it must be able to be confessed by all God’s children. Volten believed that the view of the confessions had been troubled by a cloak of philosophy and scholasticism, which had in his own circles become prevalent due to the influence of Kuyper. It meant that certain matters were presented as confessional and scriptural whereas in fact they were the product of extra-Scriptural systems of thought. When a theological system begins to function alongside the confession and to dominate it, the confession can no longer be *confessed*, and it is no longer the heartbeat of the congregation. Volten opined that confessions should be read in the light of Scripture, though he was unwilling to take this to the extreme that one need not take the original historical situation into account at all. It is of utmost importance, Volten wrote, that a confession be clear so that the congregation immediately understands what is being said.

⁵¹¹ Dr. P. Smits, emeritus professor of Leiden had denied the essence of vicarious atonement. He had been denied the rights of an emeritus but was not deposed from office. It is disputed whether this case was indeed a case of doctrinal discipline (Rasker, *De NHK vanaf 1795*, 442, note 45).

In his third chapter, Volten looked at the confession as response to the doctrine of Scripture. The confession is not a photograph of Scripture but a painting, Volten wrote. He discerned a tension within the Reformed tradition between the fixedness and the mutability of confessions. There was the stricter line (Calvin-Dort-Kuyper-Polman) that considered the confessions in principle entirely fundamental and faultless, but made allowance for objections via a *jus discretionis* and *gravamen*. The less strict line (Calvin-Groen) distinguished between form and substance or fundamental and non-fundamental aspects of a confession. Volten felt that because the Kuyperian stance eventually led to a plurality of churches, it was to be considered incorrect. Volten felt that following Groen's line would introduce ambiguity or uncertainty into the church. In the first place, each should have faith in the other. In the second place, it is synod that declares the cardinal doctrines of Scripture to be binding, determines where differences of opinion might occur, and disciplines those who flagrantly contradict Scripture. Like Groen, Volten also pleaded for temporal amnesty, though his focus was not just his own church federation but the catholic church.

In his fourth chapter, Volten discussed the confession as a repetition of and response to Scripture. Volten noted that as repetition a confession implies the white thread of *quia* binding, but as response it implies the black thread of *quatenus* binding. These two are interwoven and generally not easily discerned or untangled. However, there are moments when the one thread dominates so clearly that it is self-evident what course of action must be followed, else Paul's imprecation in Galatians 1:9 would be out of order. Volten then analysed the strengths and weaknesses of the confessional approaches of the NHK and GKN[s]. His conclusion was that the GKN[s] should be more relativistic in its approach, while the NHK should be more decisive. He suggested that the path of Groen would be the way out of the difficulty.

In the second part of his publication, Volten looked at a future confession. Volten noted that, whereas the church was writing no new confessions, synodical decisions did take on confessional characteristics. He considered there to be five motives for confessions:

1. Doxological. For this to function properly each generation must own its confessions, implying that a confession must be relatively up-to-date. This applies especially to the catechism.
2. Communal. Scripture enjoins the unity of the church but the church is divided. We should rise above denominationalism and nationalist churches and strive for an ecumenical catholic unity. To achieve this, we have to re-concentrate our confession on Christ.
3. Pastoral catechetical. Our children and newcomers to the church are to be instructed in those things that are of importance in our day and age.
4. Pastoral anti-heretical. Heresy is that which is contrary to the fundamentals taught by Scripture. The church must defend these fundamentals in our own time.
5. Responsible. The church has the God-given duty to testify in the world to the truth. Much more can be said than what our confessions at this moment state.

Like Groen van Prinsterer a century earlier, Volten admitted that such new confessing for the church was still way out of reach.

Although Volten's publication initially elicited a lot of response, it appears to have been quickly overshadowed by polemics between more prominent persons within Dutch Reformed circles and the debates within the GKN(v). Moreover, Volten's publication bears more the character of a cry from the heart than a systematic academic study of the matter. Part of its importance lies in the fact that it proves that there were in fact two lines of thought on confessional subscription within the GKN[s], and that the more liberal line was not limited to academics but could also be found in the village manse.

Volten's publication is also proof of how Groen van Prinsterer was used to defend what in the eyes of many was a more liberal approach to confessional subscription. Volten understood Groen to have defended essential subscription, and suggested this approach would be appropriate for a reunified NHK and GKN[s]. It is interesting to see how Volten distanced himself from the NHK as it existed yet still advocated the modality church. The distinction between Volten and the 1951

church order was not one of principle, only a matter of where one draws the line between what is essential and what is not. Volten suggested that the churches assembled in synod might determine where this line lies.

The strength of Volten's work lies especially in his ability to analyse the various aspects of the roles confessions play in the church and where the problem areas lie. This publication is thus of great value when it comes to systematically analysing the issue of confessional subscription and seeking solutions to the various problems.⁵¹²

2.12.2.4 GKN[s]: BERKOUWER 1963

One of the key figures in the GKN[s] during the second half of the twentieth century was Dr. G. C. Berkouwer, professor in systematic theology at the Free University in Amsterdam. Berkouwer is said to have been a conciliatory man by nature, inclined towards avoiding conflict. Over the course of his life, the distance between Berkouwer's convictions and Calvinistic doctrines increased.⁵¹³

In 1963, Berkouwer published an article entitled "Questions with respect to the Confession." What makes Berkouwer's article especially interesting is his exploration of the boundary between what is essential and what is accidental to confessing in the confession. Seeking to rise above the form–substance scheme, he created the ground-motif–framework scheme. This distinction is strongly reminiscent of Hofstede de Groot's and Donker Curtius' words on 'underlying principles', made concrete and fleshed out by Scholten in his *De Hervormde Leer*. Within the context of the GKN[s], it placed Berkouwer in bad company. It also meant that he defended what was in practice essential subscription, though he himself would have understood it to be substantive subscription with 'substance' redefined as 'ground-motif'.

A weakness in Berkouwer's article is that he is brought to his questions by very practical concerns: the doctrine of double predestination confessed in the Canons of Dort. Berkouwer objected to this, but considered it not necessary to submit a *gravamen* on this point because he considered 'double predestination' to be the framework in which the Canons of Dort had placed the ground-motif of 'God sovereignly elects but is not responsible for unbelief'. Although this does not undermine the legitimacy of Berkouwer's stance, it does make it suspect: will this approach hold for every substantive aspect of the confessions, or does it only work in this and a few other limited cases? This very publication proves the point. Is Berkouwer's stance on revelation not at odds with the confessions, and is he thereby not undermining the validity of his own argument? For on the one hand he appeals to the priority of Scripture (as articulated in the confessions), and on the other hand he questions how Scripture should be read (contrary to what is articulated in the confessions).

Another point Berkouwer raised is the relevance of the confessions and the practical instruments in use to make the confessions 'work'. He notes that 'formal equivalence' does not equal 'substantive equivalence'. When two say the same words they may not mean the same thing. Hence Berkouwer considered a revision of the confessions well overdue in regards to its wording and proof-texts.⁵¹⁴

2.12.2.5 NHK: DANKBAAR 1966

In 1966, Dr. W. F. Dankbaar, professor of church history in Groningen, published an article on old confessions in new churches. It touches especially on the issue of the relevance of confessions and how new confessions may come into existence.

⁵¹² Volten, *Belijden*.

⁵¹³ As described by himself in Berkouwer, *Halve Eeuw Theologie*.

⁵¹⁴ Berkouwer, "Vragen":1-41.

Among others, Dankbaar discussed the character of a confession. He defined a confession as “in essence an ecclesiastically adopted, summarizing explanation of the Holy Scripture with a view to issues relevant in a certain period.” Positively, confessions are a testimony, an apology, an instruction, an admonition, or a word of comfort. Negatively, they are implicitly or explicitly a rejection of teachings or acts that are flagrantly at odds with God’s Word. Dankbaar went on to point out that a confession is a provisional judgement; between it and Scripture there is the act of exegesis, of hermeneutics. It is the task of theology, Dankbaar indicated, to identify the kernel from the periphery and to have the confession state no more than what is central. This will make a confession catholic. Dankbaar rejected the notion that confessions could serve to mark denominational boundaries.

Dankbaar’s article is valuable in view of the way in which he connects premises and conclusions and takes an approach somewhat at odds with that generally taken in the NHK. For example, many would agree with Dankbaar that a confession is a cry of birth, but few would then draw the conclusion that a confession may therefore not be changed. Dankbaar was in fact defending a ‘museum piece’ approach to existing confessions. Dankbaar also differed from contemporary NHK members in his reading of CO-1951 art. X: to him ‘in communion with the fathers’ has a substantive side and Dankbaar even dared to go so far as to say that one must be prepared to break this communion if the need arises.

On other points, Dankbaar held more traditional points of view. It is interesting to note how Dankbaar looked at the relationship between Scripture and confessions: the science of theology stands in between as judge. On this point, there is a similarity between Dankbaar and the position of the nineteenth century Apologist School.⁵¹⁵

2.12.2.6 GKN[s]: AUGUSTIJN, POLMAN AND BERKOUWER 1969

In 1969, Dr. C. Augustijn, professor of church history at the Free University in Amsterdam, published a popular study entitled *Church and Confession*. Taking note of discussions on the role of confessions in the church, Augustijn explored the Reformation history of confessions to provide background information to the current debate and point a way out. One drawback of Augustijn’s publication is that, being a popular study, there are no footnote references.

Noting the fact that not all in the GKN[s] were happy with the form of subscription, Augustijn looked at the original intention of the Reformers—in particular Zwingli, Calvin, and Ursinus—with confessional documents, and came to the conclusion that the confessions did not function in the GKN[s] any more as originally intended. Augustijn pointed to 1586 as the year in which subscription was placed in a new framework: confessions became a standard for faith. Augustijn noted that the GKN[s] had consciously selected the approach of the Reformed churches after 1586. However, he himself believed that confessions had come to play too prominent a role in the church. Augustijn noted that there were various suggestions in the present situation: write a new confession, adjust the subscription form, or amend the confessions. Augustijn himself believed the problem to be somewhat different: the confessions do not address the questions of our time. He advocated a return to the Zwinglian situation: a confession that deals with a point that has our attention. In his opinion, the Three Forms of Unity and the subscription form could be rescinded, especially in view of the present ecumenical spirit. In a time when many issues were unclear, energy should not be wasted on seeking clarity and consensus, he wrote.⁵¹⁶

Dr. G. C. Berkouwer, professor in systematic theology at the Free University in Amsterdam, reacted to this popular publication with a five part article in a church weekly. His interest was especially in Augustijn’s suggestions with respect to the present.

⁵¹⁵ Dankbaar, "Oude belijdenissen".

⁵¹⁶ Augustijn, *Kerk en belijdenis*.

Berkouwer agreed with Augustijn that the confessions tended to receive too much authority. However, he felt the possibility of *gravamina* made clear that confessions and Scripture were not equal. With respect to subscription, Berkouwer preferred the approach of the NHK. He added that confessions should be understood in the light of the context in which they are spoken.⁵¹⁷

In his article, Berkouwer gives the impression of being less radical than Augustijn. Whereas Augustijn wanted to do away with the tradition of confessions, Berkouwer felt this would be improper and inappropriate. However, Berkouwer followed a somewhat different approach to the confessions than Augustijn.

Dr. A. D. R. Polman, professor of systematic theology at Kampen (Koorndijk), responded to Augustijn's popular publication with a six part article in the same weekly as Berkouwer, once the latter's articles had run their course. This developed into a polemic between Polman and Augustijn on historical arguments. Augustijn claimed that the confessional practice of the GKN[s] was not the only Reformed practice, while Polman claimed it was the proper approach.⁵¹⁸

It would seem that in attempting to arrange these three prominent members of the GKN[s] on a scale, Polman defended substantive tending towards essential binding, Berkouwer defended essential tending towards attitudinal binding, and Augustijn defended the abolition of confessional subscription. It became clear that the GKN[s] was about to enter a struggle not unlike that of the NHK a century earlier.

2.12.2.7 GKN[s]: SYNODICAL DECISIONS ON CONFESSIONS AFTER 1960⁵¹⁹

When it comes to confessions and subscription to them, the 1970s were an all-important decade for the GKN[s]. The churches had changed⁵²⁰ and the GKN[s] had to rethink their official position on confessional subscription. This process began at synodical level with the recognition by GS Apeldoorn 1961 that closer ties could be sought with the NHK. The process came to an end when the GKN[s] and NHK merged in 2004.⁵²¹

This period of reflection in the GKN[s] is as important for this study as the reflection during the nineteenth century. It was reflection in all circles of the church: academic, ecclesiastical, and grass roots. It was reflection that took into account more than just ecclesiastical questions, and was not obstructed by discussion on the competency of the various parties in deliberating and deciding on the issue. It is particularly in this period of reflection that the various factors in the issue of confessional subscription become clear.

In this subsection the various events will be reviewed topically rather than chronologically. This, it is hoped, gives a better understanding of how the GKN[s] finally came to its consolidated position. In the various paragraphs brief comments will be made on details, and in a final paragraph there is an analysis of this period of reflection as a whole.

2.12.2.7.1 *Gravamen Brouwer*

In 1963, elder B. J. Brouwer of the church of 's-Gravenhage-Escamp expressed concerns to his church council regarding the Canons of Dort chapter 1. He was particularly concerned about the doctrine of double predestination. While he agreed with the doctrine of election he felt the parallel doctrine of reprobation was an incorrect logical deduction, not a Scriptural teaching. Brouwer's *gravamen* wound its way through the ecclesiastical assemblies to reach the table of GS Middelburg 1965-66. The synod did not find it easy to decide on what should be done with the

⁵¹⁷ Berkouwer, "Kerk en belijdenis".

⁵¹⁸ Polman, "Vertekend beeld"; Augustijn, "Vertekend beeld?"; Polman, "Mislukt".

⁵¹⁹ For a general overview see Plomp, *Beweging*, 38-51, 91-115. This overview takes one up to 1987.

⁵²⁰ On this change see Noordegraaf, "Amsterdam 1967 - Sneek 1970": 86-115; Endedijk, *GKN*, 2:193-204 and Dekker, *Stille Revolutie*.

⁵²¹ In many ways reflection on confessional subscription was tied in with this merger process, known as *Samen op Weg*. This reflection, however, will receive separate attention in 2.13.

gravamen—the advisory committee was even sent back to the drawing board at one stage. In the end, synod decided to appoint a study-committee to look at the objections raised by Brouwer and related questions on “the being bound of office bearers to the confessions.”⁵²²

2.12.2.7.2 *Retraction of Doctrinal Declarations*

During the first half of the twentieth century, the GKN had taken doctrinal decisions binding on office bearers. During the course of the second half of the twentieth century, these doctrinal decisions were retracted.

GS Amsterdam 1967-68 was requested to reconsider the decisions of GS Assen 1926 with respect to Rev. Geelkerken. It decided to retract the doctrinal declaration and to consider the ecclesiastical censures incorrect. This decision was phrased as follows:

Rather than pass judgement over others, synod wishes to declare, as far as it concerns the role of the *Gereformeerde Kerken*, that the synod of Assen 1926, in all its concern for the maintenance of the authority of Scripture, in the opinion of the present synod, took too exclusively a confessional stance and also in a church political sense did not practise that measure of tolerance which it could have, without giving up any aspect of its view. Thus the synod of Assen took church disciplinary measures which could have been avoided with a broader view.

Realizing that the damage done forty years ago could not be repaired, synod decided simply to express its desire to come to ecclesiastical union with all those then excommunicated. Rev. J. J. Buskes, one of those excommunicated at the time and now minister in the NHK, was given the floor and responded positively to the synod’s decision.⁵²³

GS Utrecht 1959 had retracted the Replacement Formula adopted by GS Utrecht 1946 and declared a desire for reunion with the GKN(v). The GKN(v), however, did not consider the decision far-reaching enough. GS Apeldoorn 1961 of the GKN[s] nevertheless maintained a desire to reunite with the ‘*vrijgemaakten*’. GS Amsterdam 1967-68 went a step further by declaring that the blame for the schism in 1944 was not to be sought with the ‘*vrijgemaakten*’ only, and asked the GKN(v) for forgiveness. GS Sneek 1969-70 added to the decision of GS Amsterdam 1967-68 an admission of guilt with respect to the disciplinary measures against S. G. Greijdanus and K. Schilder. The GKN(v), however, were not impressed, requesting the GKN[s] to make clear what sin in particular had to be forgiven. The issue received new attention when GS Almere 1987-88 retracted all disciplinary measures and repented of all actions during the schism of the 1940s that could be considered the responsibility of the GKN[s]. The GKN(v), however, considered the GKN[s] to have become a liberal church and thus this action on the part of the GKN[s] had no real consequences.⁵²⁴

2.12.2.7.3 *“Geen Ander Fundament” (1969-70)*

GS Amsterdam 1967-68 of the GKN[s] decided that the doctrinal declaration of GS Assen 1926 would no longer have effect in the churches. This decision caused much upheaval in the churches. Had the GKN[s] herewith officially set aside the substance of its confessions on the authority of Scripture? Many appeals were submitted to GS Sneek 1969-70. Some of the appeals concerned the decision of 1967-68, others concerned a publication by Dr. H. M. Kuitert in which he allegedly

⁵²² *Acta...GKN[s]...* 1965-66 art. 439, 440 and 448. Note that the phrase “the being bound of office bearers to the confession” was chosen in preference to “the functioning of the confession” and “the way in which the confession ought to function”. The concern of the committee was very specifically confessional *subscription*.

⁵²³ *Acta...GKN[s]...* 1967-68, art. 209 and 280 contain the texts of decisions. For other relevant articles see ‘Assen 1926’ in the index.

⁵²⁴ *Acta...GKN[s]...*, 1959-60, art. 140, 141, 143-5, 151, 223, 225, 226, 228, 229, bijl. 31; *Acta...GKN[s]...* 1961-62, art. 209, 210, 222, 303, 306, 307, 311, 312-4, 344, bijl. 62 and 76; *Acta...GKN[s]...* 1967-68, art. 90, 130, 166, 172, 227, bijl. 30; *Acta...GKN[s]...* 1969-70, art. 324, 390, 391, 402, 411, 412, bijl. 100 and 103; *Acta...GKN[s]...* 1987-88, art. 100, 123, 267, bijl. 45.

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went beyond the freedom permitted by the 1967 decision. Thirdly, it was to this synod that the report was submitted by the study committee appointed by GS Middelburg 1965-66 with a view to the Brouwer-case.

The report concluded from New Testament data that the following three elements were constitutive for confession.

1. Confessing is public or open, as is evident from the fact that it occurs spontaneously, amidst the congregation and before the civil judge;
2. Confessing is standardized, for it seeks to 'say the same'; deputies described how in the New Testament there is a process from 'confession *qua*' to 'confession *quae*'.
3. Confessing is forensic, it is a 'giving account'. "What makes confessing binding is the continuing validity of this agreement with the gospel and the preservation of the bond with the congregation to whom this gospel is entrusted as παραδός, παραθήκη, etc." Hence there is a bond with 'doctrine' in the New Testament. Deputies drew the following conclusions from this:
 - a. Confessing which is concentrated on the gospel of God in Jesus Christ has a dominating place in the New Testament. "In this confession the church receives its unity, it preserves its apostolic character, it exhibits its holiness by allowing itself to be standardized by it and proves its catholicity in its giving account to the whole world by confessing the one name and the one Lord."
 - b. The process towards confessing as substantive is natural and not necessarily a formalization; we see here the concurrence of the subjective and objective elements in confessing.

After offering a review of the history of confessional subscription in the Reformation period (and stating explicitly that reflection of the matter in the nineteenth century had not been studied), deputies concluded that writing, subscribing, and maintaining confessions was in principle justifiable. They did, however, have some remarks about the way in which subscription was given form:

1. One should distinguish between the issue itself and the presentation of the issue.
2. In the struggle with false doctrine the church is forced to extensively articulate its position, and can only do so in frameworks and thought-structures of its own time. One is bound only to the substantive contents and the intention of a confession. For this reason a confession should be as brief as possible.
3. Also within the existing confessions one must distinguish between fundamental and non-fundamental matters; especially since the Reformation confessions served to distinguish the various Protestant churches from each other.

The deputies concluded that the problems the GKN[s] were facing were primarily caused by the time span between the symbols and confessions on the one hand and the congregation on the other, as well as new insights gained via the study of Scripture. It would be good if a new confession were written, though deputies felt that this should happen spontaneously. Deputies also felt that the forms of subscription should be rewritten: the church must seek the tension-filled path that combines *quia* with *quatenus*, they wrote. *Quia* without *quatenus* means orthodoxism and confessionalism, *quatenus* without *quia* means liberty without limits and 'dominocracy'.⁵²⁵

Deputies concluded that the forms of subscription should be changed, and submitted proposals thereto.

⁵²⁵ In Dutch a minister is called a *dominee* (cf. Latin *dominus*). 'Dominocracy' is the situation where the minister lords it over the consciences of other congregational members.

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Synod's advisory committee had some minor points of criticism on this report. Among other things, it suggested that the phrase 'complete agreement with the confession of the churches' in article 24 of the Church Order on confessional subscription be amended to 'substantive agreement' or a similar phrase.

After quite some discussion, GS Sneek 1969-70 decided to remind the churches that the Three Forms of Unity form the accord of ecclesiastical fellowship and thus, naturally, have binding authority. Synod further declared:

1. that it is desirable and necessary to seriously entertain the question whether, and if so, how, the church should come to a new confession in a manner that suits our time and in language that suits our time.
2. that objections against a manner of expression or line of argument of the Three Forms of Unity are not of such a nature that they prevent 'complete agreement' as required by article 24 of the Church Order.

Synod was not convinced, however, that the time was ripe to look at reviewing the forms of subscription. The debate had left the general impression that the material was not sufficiently clear for the synod to take firm decisions. The synod therefore decided to appoint a new studycommittee, which was to reflect further on the issues of confessional subscription and new confessions. Rev. Dr. H. B. Weijland, delegated to a synod for the first time, had urged the appointment of this committee and was himself appointed to it. He would play a pivotal role in reflection on confessional subscription in the following decades.

As a result of the upheaval, the broad executive of the synod issued a pastoral letter entitled *Geen Ander Fundament (No Other Foundation)* which addressed four points: questions surrounding Genesis 1-3, the nature of Scriptural Authority, the matter of horizontalism, and confessional subscription. With respect to this fourth point, it is interesting to note how in this official publication the phrase coined by Groen van Prinsterer—broadminded and unambiguous—was used to express the tension within confessional subscription. The leadership of the GKN[s] was convinced that one should not seek resolution of this tension but learn to live with this tension. While Groen van Prinsterer had indeed wanted to bring this tension to expression with this phrase, his 'broad-mindedness' was certainly not as broad as that of the GKN[s], and his 'unambiguity' probably not as strict as some in the GKN[s] would like to have seen it. In all probability, the phrase was also used to impress upon its readers the desire of the GKN[s] not to deny its historical roots.⁵²⁶

2.12.2.7.4 Binding to the Confession

In 1971, the deputies appointed to look at the issue of confessing submitted their report to synod. This report evidences much serious reflection on the issue and, together with the report submitted at the following synod, forms one of the more important publications on confessional subscription in recent Dutch Reformed church history. The key author of the report was Rev. Dr. H. B. Weijland.⁵²⁷ Much has been packed into the eighteen pages of this report, and it can be considered one of the important documents in the history of reflection on confessional subscription.

Instead of maintaining strict subscription and changing the confessions, deputies suggested "increasing the margins" of confessional subscription. Deputies warned, however, that such "loosening up" should not result in a "spirit and main substance binding", for confessional subscription was an essential aspect of the GKN. "Our concern", deputies wrote, "is agreement concerning the issue, and the form for subscription is our way of emphasizing our being bound to

⁵²⁶ *Acta...GKN[s]... 1969-70, art. 129, 161, bijl. 28 and Executive van GS Sneek 1969-70, Geen ander fundament.*

⁵²⁷ On Weijland's influence see Koffeman, *Weijland*, 10.

Scripture. The confession is our accord of fellowship”; deputies considered the term appropriate. They realized, however, that agreement was disintegrating in the churches and questions were arising in relation to the identity of the GKN. In this situation, deputies wrote, “a clear functioning of confessional subscription via a subscription form is a pastoral necessity.”

Deputies felt that a new form of subscription should distinguish between the binding to Scripture, to the Catholic Symbols, and to the Forms of Unity. They suggested the following articulation of binding: obedience to Holy Scripture as the standard and guideline for faith and life, binding to the ecumenical symbols, and standing by the confessing of the church as described in the Three Forms of Unity. Deputies admitted that the terms ‘obedience’, ‘binding’, and ‘stand by’ could not be clearly delineated. They further noted that this approach did not yet give room for new confessing, and thus suggested that the form of subscription also include a promise to agree with “a new confessing of the church”. They pointed out that the churches should realize that it is Christ who gathers the Church; this is not the work of humans via juridical formulas, and thus a ‘juridical-literal binding’ is too much. On the other hand, Christ gathers His Church through Word and Spirit; so it is imperative that the Church continue in the way it has done in the past, implying that a ‘spiritual binding’ would be too little. Deputies referred to their advocated form of binding as ‘dynamic binding’.

Deputies also believed that the form of subscription should make explicit mention of the need for deliberation to take place in brotherly love. At the root of it, our problem is not the confession or the form of subscription, they wrote, but the way in which we together form a church. Pure doctrine is not a prerequisite for *κοινωνία*⁵²⁸ but a consequence. The concept ‘dynamic binding’ focuses attention on this fact: neither heavy juridical measures nor the spiritual framework of boundless trust in the resilience of the congregation is the essence of binding, but the reality of love for the Body of Christ. In view of this, deputies pleaded for a ‘theological laboratory’ where ‘mistakes’ might be made without the threat of immediate suspension.

Deputies pleaded further for the writing of a new confession. They realized that writing a new confession would not be easy. As it is being drafted the question will constantly arise “who are we throwing overboard when we say this?” Moreover, will not the process of articulating opinions drive parties further apart? Are we looking to be a “general church” or a “Reformation church?” In response to such questions, deputies asked: how is it that we can easily write and adopt a new hymn and not a new confession? “If we on account of an inability to articulate and a fear to ‘fill in’, continue to say ‘no’ to the possibility of an up-to-date credo, has the reality of faith at its

GKN[s]—FS-1972

We, Ministers of the Word, resorting under the classis ... of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, declare by this our subscription, that we acknowledge the Holy Scripture as the Word of God, the authoritative revelation of the Gospel of God in Jesus Christ, and therefore as only rule for faith and life.

We promise that in the unity of true faith we will hold fast to the confessing of the church, which the fathers have brought to expression in the three general confessional documents and in the three forms of unity. We shall therefore resist and help ward off all which contradicts this confessing.

We declare that, should we come to a sentiment deviating from that confessing, we are ready to submit it, urged thereto by brotherly love, to the ecclesiastical assembly (church council, classis or synod) for examination.

We recognise at the same time the right of the ecclesiastical assembly (church council, classis or synod)—if in her opinion there is sufficient reason to do so—to request of us further explanation of our sentiments.

And we promise, that—should the ecclesiastical assembly come to the judgement that with respect to any point of doctrine clearly and in a for her intolerable manner contradiction Holy Scripture and thereby injure the unity of the faith—we will submit ourselves to her judgement and shall conduct ourselves in accordance with the stipulations determined by the general synod on this point.

⁵²⁸ Deputies consistently used the biblical Greek term, usually translated with ‘gemeenschap’ (‘communion’ or ‘fellowship’).

deepest not made room for the reality of doubt?" In view of the fact that the confession grows where Christ is sanctified in the hearts as Lord, it is not spiritual to speak of the impossibility⁵²⁹ of a new confession.

The report was positively received by the synod and elicited much debate.⁵³⁰ The synod considered that there were indeed more factors that hindered 'complete agreement' with the confessions than just the manner of expression and the line of argument. In line with the report of deputies, the synod also came to the conclusion that incidental changes to the confession would affect 'the whole of confessing'. The synod therefore declared that the Three Forms of Unity should remain unaltered, and that the forms of subscription should be revised. It appointed a synodical committee to draft new forms of subscription for proponents, ministers, and theological professors and lecturers, and stipulated several of the elements the forms had to include. The synod also appointed two new committees. The first was to reflect further on issues of confessional subscription, including differentiation between ministers on the one hand and theological professors and lecturers on the other, the distinction between 'judicial discipline' and 'justicial discipline',⁵³¹ and the way in which classes might become more involved in mutual supervision of the confession of office bearers. This committee became known as deputies Doctrinal Discipline. The second committee, consisting of Prof. Dr. G. C. Berkouwer of Amsterdam and Prof. Dr. H. N. Ridderbos of Kampen, was to investigate the matter of a new confession.⁵³²

The committee appointed to draft new forms of subscription performed its task, and thus the synod came to adopt three new forms. The various forms came into effect on April 15, 1972.

Finally, it should be noted that the synod never adopted the terminology 'dynamic binding', though the phrase continued to function for a long time as a characterization of the position of the GKN[s] on confessional binding.

2.12.2.7.5 New Confessing: *Geloofsgetuigenis* (1974-1979)

At GS Haarlem 1973-75, Profs. G. C. Berkouwer and H. N. Ridderbos submitted a report on new confessing. Their report was entitled *Geloofsgetuigenis* (*Faith Testimony*) and consisted of three parts: an Explanation, Reflection on confessing, and a *Proeve* (Trial) of new confessing.⁵³³ The *Geloofsgetuigenis* itself did not spend many words on the issue of confessing and confessional subscription; it was primarily concerned with actively confessing and proposed a text. However, what little the report does say is worthy of note. The professors wrote:

The confessing of the church is not identical to a 'life and world view', to a certain substance of knowledge which may be debated by varying schools of thought, but it is bound in its essence to the confession of the Name of the Lord in the New Testament, which is accompanied by the promise that the name of the confessor will be confessed before the Father and the angels of God.⁵³⁴

GS Haarlem 1973-75 adopted the *Geloofsgetuigenis* in first reading and submitted it to the churches⁵³⁵ as well as to other Reformed churches in The Netherlands, and to ecumenical bodies

⁵²⁹ The text has 'possibility' but it is clear that the text should read 'impossibility'.

⁵³⁰ For a summary of this debate see "Binding":5-6.

⁵³¹ On these terms see 2.12.2.7.6.

⁵³² *Acta...GKN[s]...* 1971-72, art. 162, 166, 167, 185, 187, 188, 191, 197 and bijl. 57a and b.

⁵³³ In literature this report or confession is thus referred to either by the name of *Geloofsgetuigenis* or *Proeve*. It was published as Berkouwer and Ridderbos, "Geloofsgetuigenis". Sometimes it is referred to as *Eenparig Geloofsgetuigenis* (United Faith Testimony).

⁵³⁴ Berkouwer and Ridderbos, "Geloofsgetuigenis", 13.

⁵³⁵ Of interest is the reaction of the NHK: it rejected this confession, primarily on advice of the *Gereformeerde Bond* (see Van der Graaf, *NHK: Belijdend Onderweg*, 249-252).

such as the Reformed Ecumenical Synod, the Council of Churches in The Netherlands, and the committee Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches.⁵³⁶

GS Zwolle 1977-79 debated the status of the *Geloofsgetuigenis*. It acknowledged that its reception in the churches had been mixed. While the synod did consider it a summary of the main issues of ecclesiastical confessing, it decided not to give the *Geloofsgetuigenis* confessional status in the church-orderly sense of the term. It mandated deputies Church Order to come with a proposal regarding what status the document should be given. The synod further decided that it would not revise the *Geloofsgetuigenis* or give another mandate for a new confession. Finally, the synod decided to investigate whether it would be useful to create a new project for a catechism in line with the *Geloofsgetuigenis*.⁵³⁷

2.12.2.7.6 Deputies Doctrinal Discipline

At GS Maastricht 1975-76, deputies Doctrinal Discipline submitted a report on the involvement of classes in the supervision of the confession of ecclesiastical office bearers. This matter is not of interest for this present study since it is concerned only with practical regulations.⁵³⁸

This left the deputies with two issues yet to report on: differentiation between ministers on the one hand and theological professors and lecturers on the other hand concerning confessional subscription and, secondly, the distinction between ‘judicial discipline’ and ‘justicial discipline’. Its report on these matters was submitted to GS Zwolle 1977-79. Like the preceding report in 1971-72, it is an important milestone in reflection on confessional subscription in Dutch Reformed circles.

Prior to looking at this report an explanatory remark is in order. In 1971 the terms ‘judicial discipline’ and ‘justicial discipline’ suddenly appeared in synodical documents. The phrases were coined during the 1960s to distinguish between the judicium of a synod in a doctrinal discipline case and its justitia. The adjective ‘judicial’ was used to refer to the judgment of synod whether a particular teaching was in error or not. The adjective ‘justicial’⁵³⁹ referred to the sentence of synod, the sanction imposed on the person propagating the teaching. As such, ‘judicial discipline’ was commonly used to refer to the ‘material’ side of a doctrinal case, ‘justicial discipline’ was commonly used to refer to the ‘personal’ side of a doctrinal case.⁵⁴⁰

Turning now to the report of deputies Doctrinal Discipline as submitted to GS Zwolle 1977-79, though the deputies did not consider it necessary to add fine distinctions to the procedure of doctrinal discipline, they did believe distinction necessary at the end of the process. To this end, deputies suggested that the final paragraph of the form of subscription be amended to include the following statements:

discipline is only applied when

1. a *weighty* point of doctrine is at issue
2. Holy Scripture is contradicted in an *obvious* manner
3. the unity of faith and confessing must have been harmed or contradicted in a manner *unacceptable* for the church

The deputies pointed out that such stipulations would make clear to any assembly dealing with a doctrinal discipline case that it will require much time, study, patience, and discussion. If all three conditions are met, disciplinary action is unavoidable. In line with this point, deputies suggested a new text for the final paragraph of the form of subscription. The deputies further added that in a

⁵³⁶ *Acta...GKN[s]...1973-75*, art. 147-148.

⁵³⁷ *Acta...GKN[s]... 1977-79*, art. 328, 329, 330, 331, 354, 370 (328 and 331 are the key references).

⁵³⁸ *Acta...GKN[s]... 1975-76*, art. 252.

⁵³⁹ Dutch-English dictionaries translate both ‘*judicieel*’ and ‘*justitieel*’ with ‘judicial’, hence I have coined my own phrase ‘justicial’, a term that has existed in the English language, albeit with a broader meaning.

⁵⁴⁰ For an example of this, see the Kuitert-case reviewed in 2.12.2.7.7 below.

Historical Part

situation of total disorder, a classis or even provincial synod can interfere in local affairs, but only if requested to do so by members of the local church council or congregation.

It is of course possible, the report continued, that study and discussion reveals that the point at issue is ‘not so weighty’, the contradiction is ‘not so obvious’, and it may be difficult to say whether what has taken place is ‘unacceptable’ for the church. Calvin also distinguished between necessary and not-so-necessary articles of faith. As Bavinck had already said in 1888, ecclesiastical fellowship makes distinction necessary, and thus we distinguish between heresy, errant teaching, and doubt. Thus, on the one hand, there are centres of confessing which are not open for debate, and, on the other hand, there will never be agreement in everything (cf. 1 Cor. 13:9). It is impossible to indicate *a priori* what may and may not be discussed. The deputies phrased this as follows:

The church is not able to draw up a list of fundamental articles which may not be contradicted, and non-fundamental articles concerning which difference of opinion may be tolerated since they do not obviously contradict Scripture or thoroughly harm the unity of faith and confessing.

However, the church can, in every new situation, decide whether this is the case, and is to do so in its assemblies. In such an event the result can be two-fold: the church can decide the issue requires disciplinary action, or the church can decide that disciplinary action is not required but further study is warranted.

This brought the deputies to the distinction between ‘judicial discipline’ and ‘justicial discipline’. Noting that the terms had no church-political status—they did not appear in any official church document—the deputies pointed out that the terms were unclear. In view of the foregoing, it is clear that a *judicium* may indeed lead to a situation in which no discipline is exercised, but further study is called for. On the other hand, every justicial act includes the judicial. The deputies were concerned that adoption of these terms would overshadow if not overrule the pastoral character of church discipline. They were also of the opinion that officially adopting the terms ‘judicial discipline’ and ‘justicial discipline’ would confuse the church membership, since ‘judicial discipline’ could be understood to imply that ‘justicial discipline’ would always follow. The deputies therefore concluded that the terms should not be given church-political status.

The synod was very impressed with this report. It decided unanimously to follow up on its advice. The terms ‘judicial discipline’ and ‘justicial discipline’ were not officially adopted for the reasons noted in the report. Deputies Church Order were mandated to amend the Church Order in accordance with the suggestions of the report. Finally, the synod adopted in first reading the following text to replace the final paragraph in the various forms of subscription:

And we promise that—should the ecclesiastical assembly come to the judgment that with respect to any weighty point of doctrine we obviously contradict Holy Scripture and thus harm the unity of the faith and confessing in an unacceptable manner—we shall submit ourselves to its judgment and we shall conduct ourselves in line with what has been determined in the church order concerning admonition and discipline over [office bearer in question], reserving the right and duty to submit an appeal or a request to revision in the case of objections, pending the procedure, with respect to which we shall conduct ourselves in accordance with the concerned assembly’s directions.⁵⁴¹

It is interesting to note how the deputies had resolved the niggling problem of the relationship between theology as a science and theologians as office bearers in the church. In 1971, the deputies had suggested that maybe some sort of ‘laboratory’ should be created where mistakes might be made. The deputies in 1977, however, suggested that theologians in their theological activities were also bound to the confessions. The only distinction that needed to be made was with respect to the procedures: when it comes to theologians, there is no church council to appeal to.

⁵⁴¹ *Acta...GKN[s]... 1977-79*, art. 70, 71 and bijl. 15 and 16. See 2.12.2.7.10 for the rest of the history of this change.

Thus the matter of principle was changed to a church-political one. It is interesting to note how this change of focus meant that other ministers with a special charge such as chaplains suddenly also came into the picture. However, one should not think that the concept of a 'laboratory' was entirely dropped. For the deputies also qualified subscription: 'weighty point of doctrine', 'obviously contradict' and 'harm in an *unacceptable* manner'. With the emphasis on the need for study and discussion in the course of a doctrinal discipline case, more room had been created in the GKN[s] for opinions deviating from what was perceived to be 'normal'. In effect, the ecclesiastical assemblies rather than the universities became the laboratories that deputies had asked for in 1971.

2.12.2.7.7 Doctrinal Discipline in Practice: Brouwer, Kuitert and Wiersinga

During the course of the 1960s and 1970s, synods of the GKN[s] were frequently confronted with concrete cases in which confessional subscription was at issue. Three of these will be reviewed as illustrations of how the GKN[s] struggled with the issue in practice as it was reflected on in theory. The Brouwer *gravamen* will be considered first, since this in fact initiated the reflection. The two other cases to be reviewed concern the teachings of Dr. H. M. Kuitert and Dr. H. Wiersinga.

B. J. Brouwer

GS Middelburg 1965-66 had mandated that the deputies responsible for considering confessional subscription as a whole were also to take into account the concerns of elder Brouwer. In line with the report submitted to GS Sneek 1969-70, the synod declared that the passages in the Canons of Dort against which Brouwer had raised objections were not based on obvious data from Holy Scripture. Hence the synod considered these passages to belong to the 'factors' that 'impede requesting complete agreement' with the Three Forms of Unity. Herewith the Brouwer-case was closed, although the deputies appointed to reflect on confessional subscription were to take the confessional issues it had raised into account.⁵⁴²

H. M. Kuitert

GS Sneek 1969-70 received submissions outlining objections against the teachings of Dr. H. M. Kuitert, professor at the Free University in Amsterdam. He was accused of denying the historicity of the fall into sin as the turning away of humankind from his God in the beginning of human history. The synod, however, decided that the views propounded by Kuitert were within the bounds of 'ecclesiastical confessing'. It further decided that discussion on the point in question should be continued.

GS Dordrecht 1971-72 was again confronted with objections against the teachings of Kuitert on the issue of the fall into sin. The synod decided that, in view of the lines set out in *Geen Ander Fundament*, there was no need to review the decisions taken by GS Sneek 1969-70.

GS Haarlem 1973-75 also received a submission from a local church council in which objections were raised against Kuitert's public teachings. The synod dismissed it since the submission did not substantiate its charge.

At GS Maastricht 1975-76 there were new objections against Kuitert. He had held several broadcasts on public radio on faith and Christianity, and published these lectures in booklet form.⁵⁴³ There were all manner of objections to this publication, including criticism of Kuitert's views on confessions: Kuitert admitted that he considered confessional writings an outdated mode of expressing one's faith, and confessional subscription improper. The synod appointed a committee to have Kuitert's views clarified. The committee concluded that Kuitert's views on confessional subscription were improper. In line with this conclusion, the synod decided to reprimand Kuitert for his views. However, no sanctions were applied. The only thing synod said

⁵⁴² *Acta...GKN[s]...* 1965-66, art. 439, 440, 448; *Acta...GKN[s]...* 1969-70, art. 129, 161, bijl. 28

⁵⁴³ Kuitert, *Zonder geloof*.

with respect to the future was that discussion on the issues raised should continue, and therefore it submitted the material to its deputies Church and Theology.

GS Zwolle 1977-79 received a number of submissions objecting to the teachings of several church office bearers. Among these were objections against passages in Kuitert's publication *Wat heet geloven?* (*What should One Understand Believing to Be?*).⁵⁴⁴ The synod decided that the objections concerned issues that had been previously discussed with Kuitert, and therefore did not require further attention. New issues that had been raised were not ripe for discussion with Kuitert; the synod preferred to leave these in the sphere of general discussion.⁵⁴⁵

With this, the 'Kuitert-cases' closed, in spite of the fact that Kuitert continued to publish increasingly heterodox booklets.

H. Wiersinga

Kuitert was not the only minister under fire at GS Dordrecht 1971-72. The synod also received many objections against the teachings of Rev. Dr. H. Wiersinga of Amsterdam. He was accused of denying the doctrine of vicarious satisfaction. The synod decided to appoint a committee to discuss the issues with Wiersinga "to achieve more clarity regarding his opinions and to seek a solution for the problems, which his publications and related appeals have evoked in the church." Because this committee could not finish its work during the course of GS Dordrecht 1971-72, deputies were appointed and the matter was passed on to the following synod.

These deputies reported to GS Haarlem 1973-75 that there was indeed an issue that required attention. The synod decided that the difference of opinion was of such a nature that the discussions with Wiersinga ought to be continued in order to convince him of the incorrectness of his views. Discussions continued throughout the course of the synod, and towards the end of the synod Wiersinga informed the synod that the differences remained. The synod thereupon decided to continue with the discussions and have the next synod look at the issue again.

Thus the matter was again tabled at GS Maastricht 1975-76. The synod adopted a positive declaration on the satisfaction of Christ. It considered Wiersinga's position too complex to be able to pass judgment on his views. The synod also took note of the fact that elements of Wiersinga's position were gaining support in the churches. Hence it decided not to censure Wiersinga. The synod did, however, instruct the church council of Amsterdam (where Wiersinga was a member) to ensure that the truth was proclaimed. At GS Zwolle 1977-79, the question was raised whether Amsterdam was fulfilling its mandate properly, and synod decided it was. The synod emphasized that Amsterdam had to continue the discussions with Wiersinga.

In 1977, Dr. Wiersinga moved to Leiden and the discussion was continued there. However, there seemed to be little progress in the discussions since Wiersinga continued to advocate views that clearly deviated from traditional Calvinistic teaching. At GS Gouda 1985-87, classis Harderwijk asked how it should go about having its objections to Wiersinga's teachings dealt with. It had already submitted its objections to the church council of Leiden, but felt that Leiden had not dealt properly with it. The synod advised the classis to proceed in the way of the church order.⁵⁴⁶

With this the 'Wiersinga-case' closed.⁵⁴⁷

⁵⁴⁴ Kuitert, *Wat Heet Geloven?*

⁵⁴⁵ *Acta...GKN[s]...* 1969-70, art. 444; *Acta...GKN[s]...* 1971-72, art. 218, 233; *Acta...GKN[s]...* 1975-76, art. 88, 117-123, 125, 142, 150, 151, 432, 434-436 (432 and 436 are the key articles); *Acta...GKN[s]...* 1977-79, art. 333, 334. For the summarized committee report see *Acta...GKN[s]...* 1975-76, bijl. 70 (405-415).

⁵⁴⁶ *Acta...GKN[s]...* 1971-72, art. 321, 322, 323, 328, 405, 406 and 408; *Acta...GKN[s]...* 1973-75, art. 233-236, 246; *Acta...GKN[s]...* 1975-76, art. 176-185, 188-191, 219, 437; *Acta...GKN[s]...* 1977-79, art. 91; *Acta...GKN[s]...* 1985-87, art. 90, 135. Whether Classis Harderwijk actually did continue with its objections I do not know, it is a fact that Wiersinga was never disciplined in the GKN[s] and the matter was never again tabled at a general synod.

⁵⁴⁷ For the sake of completeness I note that at GS Goes 1997-1999 charges very similar to those brought against Wiersinga were submitted against Dr. den Heyer, professor of New Testament at Kampen (Koorntmarkt).

Conclusion

These three doctrinal cases illustrate how the GKN[s] was clearly ill at ease with the traditional stance on confessional subscription. As reflection progressed during the 1970s, decisions regarding doctrinal teachings tried to keep pace. It is interesting to note how the Wiersinga case culminated in a *judicium* without the application of sanctions. By such practice, the synods had effectively opened the gates to doctrinal liberty. Because the appeals failed, some of those opposed to Kuitert and Wiersinga left the GKN[s] to join other Reformed churches. Others migrated to the migrant churches in North America, Australia, South Africa, or New Zealand.⁵⁴⁸ This meant a blood-letting for the conservative wing in the GKN[s] and hastened the pace with which the GKN[s] adopted a stance more like that of the NHK in relation to confessional subscription.

2.12.2.7.8 God Met Ons

In view of all the discussions and upheaval in the churches, deputies Church and Theology submitted a report to GS Delft 1979-80 on the issue of the authority of Scripture entitled *God Met Ons* (in English known as *God in Our Midst*). Since the doctrine of Scripture in many ways directly relates to positions on confessions and subscription to them, the report is of interest to this present study. Two sections in this report are of particular interest: the discussion on ‘concepts of truth’ and the discussion on confessional writings and their relation to Scripture.

The report outlined the following three concepts of truth:

1. Objective truth: one presents something the way it is: a fact or reality
2. Subjective truth: one presents something the way one sees it: a belief or impression
3. Relational truth: one presents something in the form of the relation between the objective and subjective: a symbol

According to the deputies the relational concept of truth comes closest to the concept of truth employed in the Bible.

When discussing the phenomenon of confession in relation to Scripture, the deputies began by noting that Scripture may not be interpreted privately (2 Pet. 1:20-21) but must be understood in communion with the church of all ages. “Especially in confessions the church has laid down the framework, within which the explanation of Holy Scripture in its opinion ought to move.” Because Scripture has supreme authority, an individual should, however, be given space if he believes Scripture points in another direction. There are also new treasures (Matt. 13:52). The report continued:

Only when faced with a moral dilemma will the church make use of its right to decide which explanation is the correct one. The church as interpreter of Scripture of course has more authority than an individual interpreter. But it should not really come thus far. Church and theology cannot do without each other, where it concerns the interpretation of the living Word.

The full riches of the Gospel only become evident together with all the saints, the deputies noted. The revealed truth is eternal, and we time-bound humans only know the truth in part. “That which we know of God’s truth is always determined relationally.” “It should not surprise us that in the course of time what we perceive to be the truth changes.” Whether the individual is correct is only proven when he is able to convince the many. The church does not own the truth; alongside old and trusty truths new ones may emerge. This is why the church needs theologians. However, theologians also need the church, for an individual errs more quickly than a group. With the benefit of hindsight, the deputies noted, pointing to Luther, Galileo, and Geelkerken as examples, we have learned that an individual may in part have been correct.

⁵⁴⁸ With respect to North America I point to dr. L. Praamsma. It would be interesting to see whether there is link between these migrants and the schism in the 1990s in the Christian Reformed Church in North America, which led to the formation of the United Reformed Churches in North America.

This report was adopted by the synod to be discussed in the churches. Two synods later, at GS Dokkum 1983-84, it was reported that the report had not been well received. The synod requested deputies Church and Theology to look at the *God Met Ons* and attempt to clarify the situation. They reported to GS Gouda 1985-87.

Deputies Church and Theology began their report by noting criticism of the report *God Met Ons*. The NHK had asked why the approach found its starting point in concepts of truth and not in revelation. The last synod of the GKN[s] had asked for further explanation of the concepts 'objective' and 'subjective'. Deputies reviewed three approaches to Scripture: Scripture determines our thinking and acting; our experience determines what we can use of Scripture; or interplay exists between our context and the prescriptions of Scripture.

Deputies noted that the authority of Scripture is in fact the authority of the Lord. "The certainty of the faith lies in this approach not in the precise acceptance of the letter of the Bible, nor in the exact formulation in the confessional writings. It is much rather a certainty that Jesus Christ is indeed the Saviour of the world." One must give an account for one's faith. However, one cannot justify one's faith by saying 'this is God's Word so it has authority'. The correct justification is 'this is what God's Word does to me and this is what it can or shall do to you'. Moreover, when it comes to believing, one does not *choose* but becomes *convinced*.

This report was well received by the synod and sent to the churches to take note of.⁵⁴⁹

Evaluating this, the importance of this report lies especially in its analysis of the concept of truth. The truths confessed in confessional writings had generally been considered to be 'eternal truths'. As such, confessions operated with the first concept of truth and emphasized Scripture as revelation. In this scheme, a high view of Scripture means a high view of confessions. The subjective approach had become prominent in Reformed circles in the thoughts of Groninger-Evangelicals and Ethicals and—if one will allow a distinction between emotional experience and rational experience—Modernists. Their lower view of Scripture also led to a lower view of confessions. The GKN[s], it appears, sought the synthesis of these two poles by advocating a relational concept of truth and emphasizing the interaction between the objective and subjective sides to the use of Scripture. Confessional writings are then considered to be the articulation of this interaction. Confessional summaries are then not simply 'summaries of what Scripture teaches' but are more than 'opinions of what persons believe'. Hence one cannot be bound to confessions as if they were Scripture, but one ought nevertheless to be bound to confessions because they are an authoritative voice on what Scripture has meant to one's forefathers.

2.12.2.7.9 The Report "Believing Together"

GS Bentheim 1981-82 had received several letters from churches concerning the state of spiritual life in the GKN[s]. After quite some discussion, the synod mandated the section Pastoral Care of the committee Congregational Life to write a guideline to encourage reflection and discussion on spiritual life in church councils and congregations. They produced a tract entitled *Samen Geloven (Believing Together)*, published as a separate edition of *Kerkinformatie*.⁵⁵⁰

This guideline describes how in the GKN[s] 'confessional interests' had lost their predominant position in ecclesiastical affairs and become just one of the elements in Christian life experience. It is of interest because it demonstrates how doctrine was not considered to be part of every

⁵⁴⁹ *Acta...GKN[s]...* 1979-80, art. 319, 320, 322-325; *Acta...GKN[s]...* 1985-87, art. 249. Note that the second report is not included in the acts of synod but exists as a separate stencil entitled "Rapportage van de deputaten kerk en Theologie aan de generale synode van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, Gouda 1985" and is dated October 2, 1986.

⁵⁵⁰ The cover of this edition indicates it as *Kerkinformatie*, issue 153, a special appendix to 152. This numbering, however, is inaccurate. It is an appendage to the August 1983 issue which is numbered 142. Number 143, however, is the September issue. Thus, strictly speaking, this 'appendix' has no number of its own.

Christian's life experience, but merely one type among many. Theoretically speaking, one can be a Christian without being all too concerned about doctrine (about what one believes). Thus it well illustrates how there is an anthropological aspect to confessions and confessional subscription.⁵⁵¹

This approach of making 'confessionalism' just one 'sort of Christianity' was different from the NHK approach, which tended to see confessing as a thread that runs through all forms of being a Christian.

2.12.2.7.10 *The Forms of Subscription*

It is useful to review the history of the forms of subscription in the GKN[s] during this period in a separate subsection. First of all, it gives an overview of the line of development. Secondly, changes made after GS Zwolle 1977-79 were formulated not by special deputies reflecting on confessional subscription but by deputies Church Order. As such, subsequent changes to the forms were not as directly linked with reflection on confessional subscription as previous changes had been.

The story begins with GS Leeuwarden 1955 and GS Assen 1957-58. These synods adopted a primarily linguistically and modernized version of the Church Order of Dort and associated documents, including the form of subscription. The article on subscription became article 24 of the Church Order and the phrase "complete agreement with the confessions of the church" was introduced. During the course of the 1960s, article 24 became article 26 but its contents remained the same.

One of the changes introduced by CO-1959 was that it explicitly prescribed simple subscription for office bearers in the church council including the ministers.

Having decided that new subscription forms could be introduced prior to having a new confession, GS Dordrecht 1971-72 adopted new forms of subscription for proponents, ministers of the Word, and theological professors and lecturers, which went into force in April 1972 (cf. 2.12.2.7.4).

FS-1972 distinguished more sharply between Holy Scripture and confessions as standards in the church and pointed also to the ecumenical symbols as confessions of the church. It also focused more attention on the subjective side of confessions by officially introducing the term 'confessing' as opposed to 'confession'. Finally, it gave more explicit expression to the fact that the whole of doctrinal discussions takes place in a sphere of brotherly love.

GS Maastricht 1975-76 was asked whether there should not be a form of subscription for elders and deacons. The Church Order only stipulated that elders and deacons should place their signature beneath the Three Forms of Unity as a sign of their agreement with the confession of the churches. The synod decided not to introduce a form of subscription for elders and deacons, and declared minor assemblies to be incompetent to draw up their own forms of subscription.

GKN[s]—CO-1979 art. 26

Agreement with the confessing of the church

1. Elders and deacons shall in the first meeting of the church council, which they attend after having been ordained to office, make apparent their agreement with the confessing of the church by signing a separate form drawn up by the general synod.

2. Those who have successfully completed the preparatory exam shall in the meeting of the classis in which the examination took place, give expression to the same agreement by signing a separate form drawn up by the general synod.

3. Ministers of the Word shall express the same agreement not only by signing the form referred to in paragraph 1 in the first meeting of the church council after their ordination to office, but in addition by signing in the first meeting of the concerned classis a form that has been drawn up by the general synod specifically for them. Those who have not previously served in the office of minister of the Word, shall do the same in the meeting of the classis, in which they successfully completed their peremptory exam.

4. Professors in theology and other ministers referred to in Church Order article 16 shall, upon accepting their duties, express the same agreement, by signing a separate form drawn up by the general synod.

⁵⁵¹ *Acta...GKN[s]...*, 1981-82, art. 169-173, 188. The original report was entitled "Gemeentestructuur in Perspectief".

Historical Part

At GS Zwolle 1977-79, deputies Doctrinal Discipline submitted a new text for the final paragraph of FS-1972. They felt that FS-1972 was insufficiently clear about what situations should and should not result in doctrinal discipline. The synod followed the advice of deputies and adopted the paragraph in first reading (cf. 2.12.2.7.6).

A problem was that CO art. 26 had not kept pace with the changing text of the forms of subscription. Thus GS Delft 1979-80 decided to revise the church order and forms of subscription so that all contradictions could be removed. With respect to the forms of subscription for ministers of the Word and theological professors, it adopted the final paragraph on second reading. It also adopted a completely revised text for CO art. 26.

This article introduced a number of changes in the procedures surrounding subscription.

First of all, ministers were required to sign two different forms, one at a local level identical to that signed by elders and deacons, and one specifically referring to their ministerial duties at the classical level. In all likelihood, this regulated an existing practice. This is worth noting since the GKN(v) a year earlier had followed another route (see 2.14.2.1.8).

Secondly, the article now prescribed subscription via a form of subscription for elders and deacons as well. This is curious in view of the fact that GS Maastricht 1975-76 had decided not to introduce a form of subscription for elders and deacons.

Thirdly, the article was very brief as to what subscription was about. The qualifying adjective 'complete' with 'agreement' had been dropped, and nothing had been put in its place. References to confessions were also dropped, replaced with the general phrase 'confessing of the church'. In article 116, the Church Order spoke of "gross neglect or misuse of one's office or any other form of serious deviation from sound doctrine or a godly walk of life." In effect this meant that a concrete description of confessional binding was now only found in the form of subscription.

For the sake of completeness are noted the changes implied by the revised final article of the form of subscription for proponents, ministers and theological professors. It meant that doctrinal discipline could only be applied if the issue concerned a 'weighty point of doctrine'; moreover it had to be an 'obvious contradiction of Scripture' which 'harmed the unity of faith and confessing in a manner unacceptable for the church'.⁵⁵²

The issue of subscription returned at various synods after this. GS Gouda 1985-87 observed a difference in practice with respect to elders and deacons between the NHK and the GKN[s], and requested deputies *Samen op Weg* to study the issue. GS Almere 1987-88 was requested to drop the requirement for ministers repeatedly to sign the form of subscription at the local level. This request was not responded to positively because the synod did not consider the arguments convincing. GS Mijdrecht 1991-93 was asked whether subscription at the local level might be given the form of a promise. The synod denied the request since no new grounds had been presented for this change. However, it also asked deputies *Samen op Weg* to make haste with a concrete proposal on the point of subscription so that churches might know what the future would hold.⁵⁵³

Within the GKN[s] there was much resistance against the last line of the form used at a local level: "We shall therefore oppose and help resist all that contradicts this confessing". It was considered 'exclusive and martial', and churches petitioned to have it changed. GS Haren 1995-97 complied, and revised the second and third paragraphs of this form of subscription and parallel passages in the other three forms.⁵⁵⁴

⁵⁵² It is not clear to me when exactly these new forms of subscription actually went into effect. *Acta...GKN[s]... 1979-1980*, art. 209.

⁵⁵³ *Acta...GKN[s]... 1985-87*, art. 149, 151; *Acta...GKN[s]... 1987-88*, art. 124; *Acta...GKN[s]... 1991-93*, art. 104.

⁵⁵⁴ *Acta...GKN[s]... 1995-97*, art. 153, decision 3.

GNK[s]—FS-1979

For Ministers of the Word

We, Ministers of the Word, resorting under the classis ... of the Gereformeerde kerken in Nederland, declare by this our subscription, that we acknowledge the Holy Scripture as the Word of God, the authoritative revelation of the Gospel of God in Jesus Christ, and therefore as only rule for faith and life.

We promise that in the unity of true faith we will hold fast to the confessing of the church, which previous generations have brought to expression in the three general confessional documents and in the three forms of unity.

We shall therefore resist and help ward off all which contradicts this confessing.

We declare that, should we come to a sentiment deviating from that confessing, we are ready to submit it, urged thereto by brotherly love, to the ecclesiastical assembly (church council, classis or synod) for examination.

We recognise at the same time the right of the ecclesiastical assembly (church council, classis or synod)—if in her opinion there is sufficient reason to do so—to request of us further explanation of our sentiments.

And we promise that—should the ecclesiastical assembly come to the judgement that with respect to any weighty point of doctrine we obviously contradict Holy Scripture and thus harm in a for her unacceptable manner the unity of the faith and confessing—we shall submit ourselves to her judgement and we shall conduct ourselves in line with what has been determined in the church order concerning admonition and discipline over ministers of the Word, reserving the right and duty to submit an appeal or a request to revision in the case of objections, pending the procedure, with respect to which we shall conduct ourselves in accordance with the concerned assembly's directions.

For office bearers in the local congregation

We, office bearers bound to the Reformed Church of (or: at) ... declare with our signature, that we acknowledge Holy Scripture to be the Word of God, the authoritative revelation of the Gospel of God in Jesus Christ, and therefore as the only standard for faith and life.

We promise, in the unity of the true faith, to be faithful to the confessing of the church, that previous generations have brought to expression in the three general confessional writings and the three forms of unity.

We shall therefore oppose and help resist all that contradicts this confessing.

GKN[s]—FS-1999

Subscription form for ministers of the Word

We, Ministers of the Word, resorting under the classis ... of the Gereformeerde kerken in Nederland, declare by this our subscription, that we acknowledge the Holy Scripture as the Word of God, the authoritative revelation of the Gospel of God in Jesus Christ, and therefore as only rule for faith and life.

We promise to fulfil our common official work in solidarity with the confessing of the church and to defend this confessing. Our forebears have brought this confessing to expression in the three general confessional writings and in the three forms of unity.

We recognise at the same time the right of the ecclesiastical assembly (church council, classis or synod)—if in her opinion there is sufficient reason to do so—to request of us further explanation of our sentiments.

And we promise that—should the ecclesiastical assembly come to the judgement that with respect to any weighty point of doctrine we obviously contradict Holy Scripture and thus harm in a for her unacceptable manner the unity of the faith and confessing—we shall submit ourselves to her judgement and we shall conduct ourselves in line with what has been determined in the church order concerning admonition and discipline over ministers of the Word, reserving the right and duty to submit an appeal or a request to revision in the case of objections, pending the procedure, with respect to which we shall conduct ourselves in accordance with the concerned assembly's directions.

Subscription form for local office bearers

We, office bearers bound to the Reformed Church of (or: at) ... declare with our signature, that we acknowledge Holy Scripture to be the Word of God, the authoritative revelation of the Gospel of God in Jesus Christ, and therefore as the only standard for faith and life.

We promise to fulfil our common official work in solidarity with the confessing of the church and to defend this confessing. Our forebears have brought this confessing to expression in the three general confessional writings and in the three forms of unity.

At the same time GS Haren 1995-97 decided that certain office bearers need not subscribe the confessions: those who were in congregations or wards of congregations that were in fact partnerships of an NHK and GKN[s] congregation or ward. The *Tussenorde* (the church order for the now merged NHK and GKN[s] congregations) did not require it, in line with the practice in the NHK itself. Through an error on the part of GS Haren 1995-97, this decision did not come into force until GS Enkhuizen 1999-2000, when objections to the new forms had been considered.⁵⁵⁵

2.12.2.7.11 Evaluation

After the 1960s, the history of the GKN[s] was clearly dominated by the issue of ecclesiastical confessing and the related matter of confessional subscription. In this period, the GKN[s] changed dramatically, so much so that during the 1990s the GKN[s] as an association of churches came to be considered even less traditionally Calvinist than the NHK. How did this dramatic change of character and identity take place? And what points are of interest for this study? Those are the questions to be answered in this final paragraph. A brief description of the points raised with each milestone will be given, with comment on the reflection as a whole.

The Journey Begins

The change in the GKN[s] is best seen by considering five synodical publications: the report submitted to GS Sneek 1969-70 (and the related pastoral writing *Geen Ander Fundament*), the report submitted to GS Dordrecht 1971-72, the report submitted to GS Zwolle 1977-79, the report *God Met Ons*, and the publication *Samen Geloven*.

In 1969-70, the GKN[s] considered confessing by its nature to be public, standardized, and judicial. Writing a confession, subscribing it, and maintaining it were considered justifiable in principle. In the main, the GKN[s] wanted to be a confessional church. However, fine-tuning the approach to confessions was thought necessary. Current practice did not really match what the majority of church members desired, as described by *Geen Ander Fundament* as “confess and experience the faith of the church in an unambiguous and broad-minded manner”. The synod concluded that the distinction between an issue and the presentation of an issue should be more fully taken into consideration. In addition, due consideration had to be given to the fact that confessions articulate doctrines in time-bound frameworks and thought-structures. The synod also concluded that even within confessional writings one can distinguish between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines. Such thoughts convinced the synod that further reflection on the issue was required. The synod also decided that, in view of the time-bound character of confessions and their verbose style, it would be useful to produce a new confession.

It is clear that the GKN[s] was very deliberate and thoughtful about the role confessions should play in the church. Various events during the 1960s had not yet convinced the GKN[s] that confessional subscription in the Dortian tradition was wrong. The churches did, however, begin to place question marks alongside some aspects of confessional subscription. These questions are to be explained in the light of the decision of GS Apeldoorn 1961 to seek closer ties with the NHK, and all manner of questions being raised in all circles of GKN[s] church members concerning the propriety of confessional subscription.⁵⁵⁶

⁵⁵⁵ *Acta...GKN[s]... 1995-97*, art. 153; *Acta...GKN[s]... 1997-99*, art. 118; *Acta...GKN[s]... 1999-2000*, art. 42. GS Haren 1995-97 had erroneously adopted the forms of subscription in second reading, not in first reading, and thus not submitted them to the minor assemblies for review. GS Goes 1997-99 received protests on this point and admitted the mistake of Haren. The decision was then retracted and GS Enkhuizen 1999-2000 was mandated to consider possible objections.

⁵⁵⁶ I think of publications such as that by Volten, Berkouwer, and the debate Augustijn-Polman-Berkouwer. I also think of the *gravamen* submitted by Brouwer and the objections raised against teachings of Kuitert at synod. It should further be noted that GS Sneek 1969-70 took place when the dust was settling around the schism in the GKN(v) leading to the formation of the NGK, an event which did not go unnoticed in the GKN[s].

Milestone 1

In 1971-72 a first milestone was reached in reflection on confessional subscription. With this milestone, progress had been made on the relationship between the confession and κοινωνία, the communion. It is interesting to note how the discussion in the NHK had been on the relationship between the confession and apostolate, a movement outward, whereas in the GKN[s] the discussions focused around κοινωνία, a movement inward. This milestone also marks progress with respect to the role of the subjective element in confessions. On this score the reflection was two-pronged. On the one hand, attention was paid to the subjective element as it has its source in the origins of the confession. Form and contents were considered so integrated as to be inseparable, for in the forms they chose the authors had also brought their faith to expression. It is interesting to see how also the form of subscription was justified in this way. In view of the threat of an Arminian coup, one could understand why GS Dordrecht 1618-19 drew up a form of subscription like FS-1619. On the other hand, attention was paid to the subjective element as it existed with present-day readers of the confessions. In order to bring to expression the distance between present-day readers and confessions, the switch was made from 'confession' to 'confessing', a switch which the NHK had made some twenty to thirty years earlier.

At this milestone it was also clear that the end of the journey had not been reached and that further reflection was necessary. The GKN[s] realized that strict subscription was not preferable; but, rather than falling into a 'spirit and main substance' subscription, where should the line be drawn? It is interesting to note how in 1983 this situation was analysed in terms of the imagery of a playing field.⁵⁵⁷ No need was felt to define the outer limits of the field since all the players were considered to be in the centre of the pitch. However, Kuitert and Wiersinga had already wandered to (over?) the edge. These two cases probably also played a role in the other questions raised. Both were doctors in theology, and should not theologians as academics be given the room to experiment? In the course of their cases, it was discovered how difficult it is to hold brotherly conversations that only result in a clarification of positions, and not in convincing the other party. The synod felt the need to practise judicial discipline but was unwilling to proceed to justicial discipline. The question was whether this approach, which had no church-political foundation, was in fact justified.

Milestone 2

It took much longer for reflection to reach the next milestone. During the 1970s, reflection had split in two: a dogmatic-symbolic side and a church political side. The second milestone is where new church order articles and forms of subscription had been adopted, and reflection on the church-political side to confessional subscription had reached an endpoint. For the more in-depth spiritual issues, reflection did not reach a milestone until the early 1980s. This created the rather strange situation in which procedural decisions were being taken before systematic considerations had consolidated and crystallized.

On the point of the relationship between confessional subscription and academic endeavour, a solution had been found. At face value, it would seem that the 'laboratory' idea had been dropped. However, in view of the qualifiers used to describe subscription, and the refusal to quantify these qualifiers (*a priori* no list of binding doctrines), the 'laboratory' idea had survived. The whole church, especially in its ecclesiastical assemblies, was to be the laboratory for theology. A doctrinal discipline case was to include the important component of brotherly discussion. The Wiersinga-case would prove to what extent such discussion might reach: even ten years after the case had been initially closed, the discussions were still taking place.

Noteworthy is the comment that an *a priori* list of doctrines is impossible. A. Kuyper had alleged that the confessions are to contain the fundamental doctrines of the church, the list of doctrines to

⁵⁵⁷ In view of the Dutch setting, 'playing field' could be considered synonymous for a football (soccer) field.

be subscribed. GS Sneek 1969-70 had decided that within confessions the distinction fundamental—non-fundamental also had to be applied. Now the GKN[s] decided that one could not draw up a list of fundamental doctrines. Thus the foundation of the church had come to hang in the air. One might compare confessional subscription in the GKN[s] at this stage to a ship that is tied to a bollard, but the bollard is not attached to the wharf. It was only a matter of time before the players in the field scattered and the GKN[s] found itself entertaining liberal theologians of the highest order.

Finally, it should be noted that calls for new confessing had died out. The *Geloofsgetuigenis* had proven once again that writing a confession is no mean task.

Milestone 3

The final milestone in reflection on confessional subscription in the GKN[s] might be considered the combination of the report *God Met Ons* on the authority of Scripture and the publication *Samen Geloven* on individual faith experience and the communion of saints. At this stage, reflection on confessional subscription had gone to a deeper level in the GKN[s]. It had become evident that the problems with the phenomenon were not so much associated with the phenomenon itself as with shifts in other fields, and how these shifts had impacted on confessional subscription. These shifts were changing perceptions towards divine revelation and ecclesiology. These changing perceptions, in turn, were caused by changes outside the field of religion, such as those in the fields of philosophy (epistemology) and anthropology (psychology). Changes in epistemology resulted in a new approach to revelation that necessitated a different view of confessions, as *God Met Ons* explained. And the influences of modern psychology were clearly felt in the approach to the church as a communion of individual saints, which also had repercussions for confessional subscription. This illustrates how confessional subscription is not a phenomenon that can be considered isolated from other disciplines.

At this milestone in reflection, one of the issues solved is how the objective and subjective aspects to a confession—a problem which had plagued reflection since the fall-out between Da Costa and Groen van Prinsterer—might be synthesized. In the new approach, the objective and subjective elements are traced back to Scripture and the concept of truth. The confessions are no longer an echo or response to (objective) divinely revealed realities, but articulate the subjective understanding of this revelation. Epistemologically, a position is taken between the poles of being able to know reality (Rationalism, Idealism, Empiricism) and not being able to know reality (Kant): one can only ever know in part, and one never be certain whether the part one knows reflects reality or not. One may question whether in this approach it is still possible to justify sixteenth and seventeenth century authors of the confessions who were, in their own opinions, confessing ‘eternal truths to be eternally maintained’, but it does help outline how one might deal with confessions in the present. As pointed out, however, confessional subscription from this angle had become a ship tied to a bollard that is not fixed to the wharf, for the connection between revelation and divine reality had been made doubtful, probably as a direct consequence of Kuitert’s teachings that all our knowledge of ‘Above’ comes from ‘Below’. At this stage, the whole usefulness of confessions is drawn into question. Quite understandably, the urge for a new confession had all but disappeared.

Another point in reflection of import is the discussion on types of Christians. In this scheme, the importance of confessions seems to be relegated to one among many. The impression was given that confessional faithfulness was no more important than, for example, the aesthetic or ritual appeal of liturgy, or the freedom to exercise the gifts of the Spirit. The report thus gave rise to the idea that, just as a confessional Christian was justifiably not really concerned about, for example, evangelism, so a charismatic Christian was justified in not being overly concerned about faithfulness to the confessing of the church. However, one wonders whether this relates as directly to confessional subscription as it seems. For the GKN[s] was focusing in its reflection on *confessing* while *Samen Geloven* was speaking of the confessional Christian in a way more suited

to the early 1960s than the early 1980s. One may even gain the impression from *Samen Geloven* that, for example, an experiential Christian is not a confessing Christian. *Samen Geloven* would have done better to avoid the terms ‘confessing’ and ‘confessional’ (in the sense of: attaching value to confessional writings) and used a term such as ‘traditional’.⁵⁵⁸ *Samen Geloven* does not prove that ‘confessions’ are simply an element among many other elements in ecclesiastical life. On this score, the NHK had made more progress with their position that ‘confessing’ permeates the whole of ecclesiastical life even if it does not dominate it.

With this milestone in reflection, the GKN[s] had set the inner and outer limits for doctrinal freedom. The inner limit had in fact been set in the late 1970s when it was decided that one is not bound to the details of a confessional writing. The outer limit was set by deliberately not setting it. In the late 1970s it was suggested that it be decided in each individual case whether the outer limit had been trespassed. With *God Met Ons* and *Samen Geloven*, the complexity and intensity of taking this decision was given such substance that one may well wonder whether such a decision could ever be taken. The course of events in the Kuitert and Wiersinga cases, and later in the Den Heyer case, prove how difficult this can be, even when the most central tenets of the Calvinistic tradition, such as vicarious atonement and the divinity of Jesus Christ, are rejected.

The GKN[s] had synthesized the subjective and objective aspects of confessing. It confronted them, however, with a new dilemma: that of imperfection. Just as our knowing is in part, so ecclesiastical cohabitation is in part. With all the emphasis on *κοινωνία* and brotherly love, one must be willing to tolerate the individual who remains convinced of his own views and refused to be persuaded otherwise. Such an individual might be Kuitert or Wiersinga, as such individuals had been Meyboom and Zaalberg. At this stage the GKN[s] could no longer justify their continued separation from the NHK.

A Y-junction

Milestones mark progress along a road. The report *God Met Ons* and the publication *Samen Geloven* did not mark the end of confessional reflection in the GKN[s]. They too formed a milestone from which reflection continued. However, the road along which the GKN[s] had been travelling ran parallel to the road along which the NHK was travelling. In the course of the 1980s, these two roads virtually became one, as is evidenced by the appeal of successive GKN[s] synods to deputies *Samen op Weg* to resolve the problems. Via the Y-junction of *Samen op Weg*, reflection on confessional subscription became a matter for the two ecclesiastical bodies together in one central committee. Hence this story will be resumed in 2.13.

2.12.2.8 GKN[s]—DIERMANSE

In 1974, J. M. R. Diermanse defended his dissertation on the fundamental and non-fundamental articles of faith in the theological discussion, Dr. G. C. Berkouwer of Amsterdam being his promotor. The dissertation is a detailed study of just one element of the issue of confessional subscription and does not really lend itself for review in the context of this historical survey. However, in the wake of this dissertation, Diermanse published a less academic booklet entitled *That which is Foundational and the Foundation: About the Centre of Christian Doctrine*. In it he displayed the findings of his dissertation and set about outlining the implications of these findings to the issue of confessional subscription.

Diermanse’s booklet is important because it systematically justified the ambiguity surrounding the issue of fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines. On the one hand he admitted that the distinction existed, on the other hand he argued that the distinction could never be fixed or

⁵⁵⁸ Thus I believe Plomp should not have discussed the report *Samen Geloven* in his chapter entitled “questions related to ecclesiastical confessing” but in his chapter “reflection on structures” (Plomp, *Beweging*). The same is also proven by the title of the report from which *Samen Geloven* was born: “*Gemeentestructuur in Perspectief*” (“Congregational Structure in Perspective.”)

described in advance. ‘Fundamental’ is what is fundamental for a person or church at any particular moment. The first two theses that he defended are clear:

1. One cannot speak of ‘the fundamental articles of faith’.
2. Attempts to come to a communal confessing are only partially worthwhile.⁵⁵⁹

The historical review behind this present study has indicated that Diermanse’s conclusion is correct. Excepting those who claimed that confessional documents contained all and only the fundamental articles of faith, the problem in reflection on confessional subscription has continually been the question of what belongs on the list of fundamental articles.

It is interesting to see how Diermanse drew Scripture into reflection on the existence of fundamental articles. He observed that within Scripture itself there is a variance in weight between matters, for Scripture is written by a variety of people. While Diermanse acknowledged the usefulness of speaking of the centre and periphery of matters in Scripture—or, with Bavinck, of the body and the limbs—he felt that in the end it was not as useful as many think it to be: how does one determine what is central and what is peripheral? According to Diermanse, the criterion for determining the weight of a matter in Scripture is its relevance to the reader in his situation.

Diermanse explained how faith is a circle: hearing, believing, confessing, hearing, believing, confessing etc. He appreciated Weijland’s description of the dynamic relationship that a person has with the confessions. Thus he posited that what is fundamental is primarily determined by the confessor and his situational context. This raises the question as to what might be considered to belong to the situational context. Is it simply the questions that are being asked of the confessor, or does it also include the inner urges of the confessor? Furthermore, what is the relationship between divine revelation as found in Scripture and the situational context of the confessor: is it part of this context, an entity alongside this context, or irrelevant to the question of what ought to be confessed?

Diermanse’s work gives clear proof of how complicated the discussion on fundamental articles is, and his thoughts must be considered within a systematic consideration of confessional binding.⁵⁶⁰

2.12.3 ANALYSIS

Since the NHK made clear in 1961 that it really did not want to embark on the course of justicial doctrinal discipline, one may safely conclude that positions within the NHK remained as they had been since the introduction of CO-1951. Van Sliedregt’s reaction to the course taken by the NHK simply reiterated old perspectives, and Dankbaar’s publication made some interesting new connections but introduced no new elements into reflection. As such, it is not necessary to delve into reflection in the NHK.

With respect to the GKN[s] it may be said that the publications of the 1960s generally proved an impetus to the discussions and debates of the years and decades that followed. Positions within the GKN[s] have been analysed at length in 2.12.2.7.11, and the publications and debates of the 1960s are found there.

It is worthwhile, however, to compare and contrast the approach of the NHK with that which was developing in the GKN[s]. The most striking difference is between the emphasis on apostolate, outreach, in the NHK, to which confessing was secondary, and the emphasis on κοινωνία, inner cohesion, in the GKN[s], in which confessing played a role. This can be explained in the light of the fact that the NHK was a church for the nation while the GKN[s] was a church of choice; in some ways the distinction is analogous to that between an established church and a voluntary church.

⁵⁵⁹ Diermanse, *Fundamenteel*, insert.

⁵⁶⁰ Diermanse, *Het Fundamentele*.

Historical Part

While both churches preferred the verbal ‘confessing’ to the nominal ‘confession’, for the NHK ‘confessing’ was a thread that ran throughout all ecclesiastical activity, while for the GKN[s] ‘confessing’ was one of the many ecclesiastical activities. One must not overlook that in NHK circles, given the background to CO-1951, the term ‘confessing’ was primarily one of acting, whereas in GKN[s] circles, given the more rationalist background, the term ‘confessing’ was primarily one of knowing. It will be interesting to see whether this disparity was noted in the *Samen op Weg* process and if so, how it was resolved.

Finally, in 1951 the NHK had switched from essential subscription to attitudinal subscription. The GKN[s] switched in the forty years after 1960 from substantive subscription to essential subscription. On this point, one might well say that the GKN[s] did in the 1970s what the NHK had done in 1816, seen in the light of the decisions of 1841 and 1842.

2.12.4 CONCLUSION

Traditional Calvinist doctrines were being questioned in the NHK and GKN[s]. In both circles ecclesiastical legislation was created that suited the practice in these churches. The NHK continued along the road that it had travelled for decades and the GKN[s] relinquished its past to adopt an approach not unlike that of the NHK.

2.13 *Samen op Weg*

In the course of rediscovering its confessional character, the NHK became increasingly aware of the unity of the church. It therefore approached other churches of Reformed signature to see whether reunion was an option. The GKN(HV), formed after the Geelkerken-affair in 1926, reunited with the NHK in 1946. The GKN[s], however, were not so keen. Nevertheless, in the course of time many thought that unification of the two associations of churches was necessary. This led to a course of unification talks known as the *Samen op Weg* process (SoW—Travelling Together process), which ended with the formation of the *Protestantse Kerk in Nederland* (PKN—Protestant Church in The Netherlands) in May 2004. In SoW, one of the key issues was the role of confessions and subscription in the church.

There is no need to sketch the ecclesiastical scene. The present concern is simply with the GKN[s] and NHK. Though the modalities (see 2.12.1) in the NHK had somewhat shifted and the GKN[s] had become more pluralist—in some ways even similar to the NHK in the late nineteenth century—for the present purpose in this section it will suffice to take note of the official ecclesiastical positions, beginning with publications and events (2.13.1), followed by an analysis and conclusion (2.13.2).

It should be mentioned yet that not all the congregations of the NHK and GKN[s] joined the association. Members of the NHK who did not join the association formed the *Hersteld NHK* (HHK—Restored NHK). Those of the GKN[s] not joining the association formed the *voortgezette GKN* (vGKN—continued GKN).

2.13.1 PUBLICATIONS AND EVENTS

Since World War II, the NHK had been explicitly keen on unification whereas the GKN[s] had not. However, when it came to the first official contacts, it was a GKN[s] minister who initiated debate on the role of confessions and subscription in the reunified church. This will first have attention (2.13.1.1). Subsequently, there is some chronological detail on the *Samen op Weg* process, tracing reflection on confessions and subscription (2.13.1.2). This section closes with a review of a commentary published in 2001 on CO-1951 (NHK) and one published in 2004 on CO-2004 (PKN) (2.13.1.3).

2.13.1.1 GKN[s]—WEIJLAND 1973

For the occasion of the first combined synodical assembly of the NHK and GKN[s], Dr. H. B. Weijland wrote a discussion paper on confessional subscription. Much of the paper was concerned with exploring similarities and differences between the NHK and GKN[s] approach as well as searching for the role which confessing might play in the prospective united church. This paper served as a discussion starter and was not officially adopted. It gives the impression of being the thoughts of a visionary who saw an opportunity for his dreams to be realized.

Weijland's thoughts are deep, his style of writing somewhat cryptic,⁵⁶¹ and probably because matters had not crystallized in his own mind, it is not easy to set down Weijland's view of the confessions simply. Weijland found himself at a double crossroads. First of all, the GKN[s] was in the middle of reconsidering the role of confessions in the church. Weijland was right in the middle of this: the report submitted to GS Dort 1971-72 was primarily from his hand and he was one of the deputies Doctrinal Discipline. Secondly, Weijland was a strong advocate of the SoW process, and keenly interested in bringing the NHK and GKN[s] to a new height of being a confessional church. It was not without reason that Weijland was asked to write the discussion paper for the inaugural meeting of the two synods in combined session.

⁵⁶¹ L. J. Koffeman, Weijland's successor as professor of church polity at Kampen (Koornmarkt) notes that Weijland was primarily an enthusiastic speaker (Koffeman, *Weijland*, 6).

Weijland clearly sets himself off against both the stricter approach of the GKN(v) and the *Middenorthodoxie* (formerly Ethical and Groninger-Evangelic) approach of the NHK when emphasizing that neither the details of confessing nor the enthusiasm of confessing but obedience to Christ is the issue. Weijland thus synthesizes the objective and subjective aspects of confessing by noting that both aspects must be given due attention and weight.

In his description of confessing, Weijland emphasized those aspects that he felt were lacking in his time. One of these was the testifying, apologetic aspect of confessing. As such, Weijland pointed out that NHK emphasis on the apostolate and GKN[s] emphasis on *κοινωνία* were not a dilemma; instead, they were both prerequisites for confessing to function properly. Weijland therefore also suggested that a series of single articles would achieve this end: in a spirit of solidarity (*κοινωνία*) the church would write Christ's name on society (apostolate).⁵⁶²

2.13.1.2 CONFESSIONS AND SUBSCRIPTION IN THE SOW PROCESS⁵⁶³

In May 2004, the NHK, GKN[s] and *Evangelisch-Lutherse Kerk in het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden* (ELK—Evangelical-Lutheran Church in the Kingdom of The Netherlands) merged to form the PKN. It began with the NHK's desire to unite all Protestants into the one organization. With the GKN(HV) it booked an early success. Discussions with the GKN[s] followed, and the ELK joined during the course of the 1980s.

One of the sticky issues in the SoW-process was the matter of the church's confessing. The following is a chronological review outlining the course of reflection throughout the roughly four decades of discussion and debate.

2.13.1.2.1 Early History

In 1948 the NHK and GKN[s] had official contact with each other, but GS Leeuwarden 1955-56 of the GKN[s]—the same synod that adopted a new version of FS-1619—felt that the continued contact could not be justified. The NHK was disappointed with this attitude. In 1961, eighteen ministers, nine from the NHK and nine from the GKN[s], published a public letter in which they claimed that continued separation of the two churches could not be tolerated. This gave an impulse to new re-union talks, of which GS Apeldoorn 1961 of the GKN[s] approved. However, it did not lead to any concrete results in the following years.

In 1964 a document was published entitled *Hervormd-Gereformeerd Gesprek* (*Hervormd-Gereformeerd Discussion*). It reviewed the discussion of the 1950s and concluded that the times had possibly changed.⁵⁶⁴

In the course of 1966, a committee of the NHK synod initiated a discussion among the young people of the church on the future of the church under the title *Kerk 66-2000* (Church 66-2000). One of the results of this initiative was a report submitted to the Synod 1967 of the NHK. It was reported that more than ten thousand young people between the ages of 18 and 30 years had participated in some 850 discussion groups on the future of the church. The result of these discussions had been collated, and forty-six young people had debated the most pressing issues with synod members. This had resulted in a number of these statements, including the following five on the confessing of the church:

5. The request is submitted for clear declarations at all levels about the consequences of being a dedicated Christian, more reports from Synod such as the one on nuclear weapons.

⁵⁶² Weijland, "Belijden 1973":3-16.

⁵⁶³ For a brief overview see Plomp, *Beweging*, 17-24, 164-180; this account ends in 1987. I have used the accounts (*verslagen*) of the various combined synodical meetings to write my review.

⁵⁶⁴ NHK, *H-G Gesprek*.

Historical Part

6. There is an urgent need for a new catechism in up-to-date Dutch, in which the Synod issues clear declarations on matters concerning church and society. The new Roman Catholic catechism might serve as an example.

7. The Synod should, if possible in co-operation with other churches, come to a new formulation of confessing, since the old confessional writings are not of much use to us anymore.

8. We consider it desirable, that those who profess their faith, personally articulate their confessing in writing.

9. The group has rejected public profession of faith in its present form as admission to the Lord's Supper. Public profession should, however, be maintained as:

- a. consecration in the office of all believers
- b. a personal public choice to belong to the congregation of Christ
- c. a making oneself available for service in the congregation.

The young people also felt distinction between churches, especially between the NHK and GKN[s], to be improper. They urged the synod to look seriously at reunification with the GKN[s]. The synod created a committee to look into the matter and come with proposals as to how the wishes of the young people might be met.⁵⁶⁵ In 1968 this committee suggested that discussions be held throughout the country with not just *Hervormde* youth but young people in all churches. It submitted a detailed plan on how this might be achieved. The NHK synod gave the green light.⁵⁶⁶

Thus a process was initiated in which young people from all churches were asked to discuss with each other the role of the church in society. The project came to be known as *Samen op Weg* (Travelling Together). In 1969 it was reported to the NHK synod that 571 young people from the NHK and GKN[s], and in some places of the Roman Catholic church, had participated in these discussions. Their views and perspectives were outlined in a report spanning some twenty pages. Noteworthy is the fact that the issue of confessing of the church had dropped off the agenda (although catechetical instruction is noted as a point requiring more attention). However, the project *Samen op Weg* did mean that Synod 1969 of the NHK decided to invite the GKN[s] to hold unification talks.⁵⁶⁷ GS Dordrecht 1971 of the GKN[s] responded positively, and thus in June 1973, a combined session of the two synods was held, the first of many so-called combi-synods.⁵⁶⁸

2.13.1.2.2 Combi-synod 15-16 June 1973

The combi-synod of 1973 met to discuss and reflect on two issues. One was the confessing of the church, the other was principles of church polity. For the Council of Deputies, SoW had discovered that these two formed the Gordian knots that would have to be unravelled, if not cut.

Rev. Dr. H. B. Weijland submitted a paper that was to serve as a discussion starter for the combi-synod (2.13.1.1). This discussion paper represented the views of Weijland and was not officially adopted. First in small groups and then in full session, the hundred odd members of the two synods discussed and debated the insights presented by Weijland on June 15. At the end of the discussion,

⁵⁶⁵ *Acta...NHK...* 1967 (IV), 21 (decision of synod), 138-139 (statements), 143. The statements published here are direct translations.

⁵⁶⁶ *Acta...NHK...* 1968 (II), 64 (decision of synod), 410-413 (report of committee).

⁵⁶⁷ *Acta...NHK...* 1969 (III), 50-53 (discussion and decision of synod), 229-272 (*Samen op Weg* report and report of advisory committee).

⁵⁶⁸ Such combined sessions were officially referred to as 'Combined Meetings'. The term '*combi-synode*' ('combi[nation]-synod') became common parlance, and when the ELK joined the SoW-process the term became '*trio-synode*'.—The accounts of these combi-synods are very awkward to work with. They have not been officially published. In structure they consist of an account of the meeting, a number of appendices and reports, a list of decisions taken (sometimes but not always numbered), participants of the meeting. Especially in reports there is usually a double page numbering. For my research I have made use of the accounts as they have been preserved in the library of the Theological University in Kampen (Koornmarkt).

the combi-synod came to the conclusion that further reflection was required on the following three issues:

1. The question surrounding discipline
2. The relationship between confessing and confession in progress towards the future
3. The questions related to making confessing concrete in politics.⁵⁶⁹

Thereupon, combi-synod debate focussed primarily on how the SoW-process might be structured. The combi-synod decided to appoint an Interim Council of Deputies *Samen op Weg*, which in turn erected three taskforces: *Kernen van Belijden* (Hearts of Confessing), *Samenwerking Plaatselijk Vlak* (Co-operation at the Local Level), and *Kerkordelijke Aangelegenheden* (Church Orderly Aspects).⁵⁷⁰

2.13.1.2.3 Combi-synod 17-18 September 1976

In 1976, the Interim Council of Deputies SoW reported to the combi-synod that it had not been easy to get everything off the ground. There were vacancies for both NHK and GKN[s] members: illness and other business had kept various members otherwise engaged, a problem for the taskforce *Kernen van Belijden* especially. There was also much disagreement about the precise intent of the mandate given to the Council SoW. It therefore requested the combi-synod to draft a clearer mandate.

The combi-synod complied. It decided to request the synods of the NHK and GKN[s] that the Council of Deputies SoW be given the power to appoint a special committee that would study ecclesiological issues related to the SoW-process. Among these issues was also ‘the tension between unity and pluriformity in confessing and worship’. This task was passed onto the existing taskforce *Kernen van Belijden*.

Between 1973 and 1976, the taskforce *Kernen van Belijden* had studied the matter of new confessing. It had drawn up three types of confessional writings on five topics and had submitted these to the combi-synod for comment. During the discussion, it became clear that the combi-synod was unable to decide on what to do with new confessing. The discussion was vehement: for various reasons most combi-synod members were disappointed with what the taskforce *Kernen van Belijden* had produced. The combi-synod decided:

Thankfully maintaining and living out of the confession which our churches hold communally, incapable in coming to the formulation of an entirely *new* confessional writing, the meeting decides to recommend to both synods to have a new writing drafted, in which several fundamental lines of confessing are mapped out, to serve the congregations in the challenges and temptations of this time.⁵⁷¹

Koffeman correctly notes that this decision was never executed. It was renewed at every combi-synod until 1988 and dropped of the agenda in 1990 without anyone noticing.⁵⁷²

2.13.1.2.4 Combi-synod 11-12 October 1979—Samen Kerk Zijn 1

In 1979, the two synods assembled for the fourth time in common session.⁵⁷³ The taskforce *Kernen van Belijden* presented an interim report on its progress with respect to ecclesiological issues. The report was received with such appreciation that the combi-synod decided to have it issued as a separate publication. It appeared in 1980 under the title *Samen Kerk zijn in de Nabije*

⁵⁶⁹ *Gezamenlijke Vergadering...* 1973:17.—The arms-race was a hot item in these days. The NHK condemned the use of nuclear weapons already in 1962, the GKN[s] in 1971-72 could not make up its mind, among other things unsure whether it was the task of the church to issue such a condemnation.

⁵⁷⁰ *Gezamenlijke Vergadering...* 1976, appendix 2.

⁵⁷¹ *Gezamenlijke Vergadering...*, 1976, appendix 1, decisions 1, see also decision 21.

⁵⁷² Koffeman, *Weijland*, 17-18.

⁵⁷³ The *ad hoc* combi-synod of 1978 discussed only issues related to mission, no issues directly relevant to my study were discussed.

Toekomst: een Hervormd/ Gereformeerde Oriëntatie (Being Church Together in the Near Future: a Hervormd-Gereformeerde Orientation.). Because a second booklet was published with the same title three years later, it is usually referred to as *Samen Kerk Zijn 1*.⁵⁷⁴

Samen Kerk Zijn 1 consisted of a number of short essays on various points of ecclesiology. It was adopted by the combi-synod as a report worthy of being brought to the attention of the congregations, and had been discussed and reformulated by *Kernen van Belijden* as a whole. Nevertheless, the prologue indicated who were the authors of the various chapters, thereby making clear that emphases are not an ecclesiastical choice but a personal choice.

The introductory chapter explained how the taskforce *Kernen van Belijden*, faced with specific points of ecclesiology, discovered it would first be necessary to formulate an ecclesiological framework. Hence the taskforce had first studied ecclesiology by looking at how it was currently practised in the NHK and GKN[s], what the Bible prescribed, and how the fathers of the Reformation had formulated it. The taskforce considered one finding of utmost importance, namely, that ‘ecclesiastical unity’ is a central issue of confessing. The doctrine of the unity of the church requires as much attention as the doctrine of atonement, they wrote. With respect to this unity, the issue of plurality in the church and the related matter of doctrinal discipline becomes more pressing: does plurality contradict unity or not?

The first chapter, authored by A. Geense, H. W. de Knijff and L. G. Wagenaar, attempted to distil an ecclesiology from Scripture. The authors pointed out that 1 Cor. 12:12-21, contrary to common exegesis, does not explain how members with different spiritual gifts must associate, but how members with different backgrounds (Jew and Greek, free and slave) must live together. A congregation is edified not by uniformity but by service; the Spirit does not make us all the same but liberates us to serve each other. The authors emphasized that 1 Corinthians 13 must then also be read through ecclesiological glasses: Paul writes here of the love that must be characteristic for fellowship among believers. The authors also pointed out that Paul’s concern was ‘the truth’, which contextual exegesis makes clear is not the ‘truth’ of rationalism but the truth of how one acts. Love covers, believes and hopes all things, wrote the authors, quoting Paul, and then added, “when the truth is not visible with another, it is believed and hoped that it will win.” Our love is imperfect, the authors explained, and thus faith and hope are good and necessary, but point to something greater. “The same applies to the truth and all formulations thereof: they point to a reality which is true in God and through Him, as a working reality, via faith and hope, is effectuated.”

In the second half of the third chapter, Rev. Dr. H. B. Weijland discussed how the GKN[s] and NHK might be church together in The Netherlands. He pointed out that the confessing of the church must not only be unambiguous, it must also be broad-minded. “This means,” wrote Weijland, “that the discussion about the form of a new Reformed church in our land is not to be dominated by all sorts of questions about the boundaries of that church—with all the differences of insight that belong to it and rearguard battles—but by the search for the heart of the Gospel as the secret to belonging together.” “Taking note of what Paul writes on the unity in the truth,” Weijland continued a little further on, “we see that the apostle does this not by writing about the truth which is limited by the unity but, in reverse, that the unity is called forth by the truth.” The cross is the foundation of the church. “What makes us a ‘unity’ in the church,” Weijland wrote, “is not *our* agreement but the fundamental recognition that we assemble there as people who must receive forgiveness.”

J. M. Vlijm was the author of the last chapter, which dealt with the issue of differing perceptions of the truth in the one church. He concluded, “The plurality in the congregation is a symptom of the tension between unity and apostolicity, between catholicity and holiness.”

⁵⁷⁴ Aalbers, *Samen kerk zijn 1*.

Besides this report, the combi-synod also issued a mandate for the investigation of the drafting of a new catechism for the instruction of the youth.

2.13.1.2.5 Combi-synod 17-18 November 1982—*Samen Kerk Zijn 2*

The combi-synod of 1981 discussed the relationship between the two reformed churches and the Roman Catholic Church. Besides noting that the NHK and GKN[s] considered it possible to discuss ecclesiastical matters with the Roman Catholic Church, thus distancing themselves from the confession of previous generations that the Roman Catholic Church was a false church (BC art. 29) practising idolatry (HC q&a 80), the issue of confessional subscription was not really on the agenda. It was, however, a crucial synod, for it developed a roadmap for the union, in which 1986 was proposed as the year of the merger. This put pressure on the debate.

At the regular tri-annual combi-synod of 1982, however, the issue was again discussed, for the taskforce *Kernen van Belijden* presented a second report entitled *Samen Kerk zijn in de Nabije Toekomst*. The main authors of *Samen Kerk Zijn 2* were H. B. Weijland and J. M. Vlijm. As in 1979, the report was considered worthy of separate publication, and thus appeared in print in 1983. Those parts that are pertinent to this study are reviewed below.⁵⁷⁵

In line with *Samen Kerk Zijn 1*, the authors preferred the term ‘plurality’ above ‘pluriformity’ and ‘pluralism’. They noted that unity is given, and will at some moment in time be fully visible. However, the present is marked by incompleteness. In order to overcome this incompleteness, there is a need for self-denial, the authors explained. This is not to exclude everything that is different as an idiosyncrasy—the church does have boundaries. However, these boundaries have been set too strictly. What one has to focus on is the movement of the church: do we in our plurality seek each other or distance ourselves from each other? The Christian church is not first of all characterized by an absence of difference and conflicts, but by the way in which it deals with differences and conflicts. The fact was that neither the NHK nor the GKN[s] had been able to solve the plurality issue, and the authors doubted whether it was therefore necessary to resolve the differences between the NHK and GKN[s] prior to reunification.

A few pages further on, the authors continued: the NHK and GKN[s] are agreed that the act of confessing includes the need to reject whatever contradicts this confessing. The NHK has come to realize that a confession-less church is a contradiction in terms and thus adopted CO-1951 art. 10. The GKN[s] have realized that the concrete application of doctrinal discipline is more dangerous than often thought. The regulations of the existing church orders should thus be understood:

- a. conscious of the tension between the care for the preaching and responsibility for the communion on the one hand and church orderly form given to supervision and discipline on the other;
- b. conscious of the tension between church orderly stipulations and a concrete situation; and
- c. convinced that office bearers have a special responsibility in this above the congregation and with respect to the teachers.⁵⁷⁶

Besides taking note of this report, the combi-synod considered it expedient to couple the decision on a new confession taken in 1976 with the decision in 1979 to have a new catechism drafted.

2.13.1.2.6 Combi-synods 5-6 November and 7-8 December 1984

In 1984, the synods of the NHK and GKN[s] met again to hear from the Council of Deputies SoW that the two churches were in a position to reunite. To this end, the “*Verklaring van Overeenstemming ten Aanzien van het Samen Kerk Zijn*” (“Declaration of Agreement with Respect to Being Church Together”) was adopted. As with the essays *Samen Kerk Zijn*, this declaration also does not deal in any depth with confessional subscription as such. It does, however, make

⁵⁷⁵ *Gezamenlijke Vergadering...* 1982. Note that the month mentioned on the cover (October) is in error, the synods met in November.

⁵⁷⁶ Weijland and Vlijm, *Samen kerk zijn 2*, 21-31, 39.

some very pertinent remarks on the matter. Rather striking is that immediately following the introductory words of the declaration, a peremptory remark “on the character of our common confessing” is printed in a different type-face discussing the matter of confessing. It describes the confessing of the church as lasting—confession is in communion with the church of all ages—and mobile—confession relates to the life of the believer in his time and seeks answers for those who are not yet or no longer in communion with the church.

The declaration makes clear that the SoW-process at this stage did not seek to solve the problem of confessional subscription but recognized that, where it concerned confessional subscription, both NHK and GKN[s] were at a loss as to how to act. Both churches struggled with the problem, and though they tried different solutions, they were unable to resolve the issue. Given this failure, the matter of confessional subscription could not continue to separate the churches. Their reasoning was simple: if they were struggling with the same issue separately, they might as well struggle together.⁵⁷⁷

2.13.1.2.7 Combi-synods 29-31 May and 13-15 November 1986

At the two combi-synods of 1986, the implications of co-operation were further worked out and a roadmap to reunification was created. Other issues were also discussed, including co-operation in the areas of mission and evangelism. At the November combi-synod, the ELK officially requested to be allowed to participate in the SoW process. This had the effect of expanding the process from a Calvinistic one to a Protestant one, broadening the confessional basis.

2.13.1.2.8 Combi-synod 27-28 October 1988

A custom had developed with the Council of Deputies SoW to submit to each combi-synod a “*schets*” (“sketch”), a progress report that focused on issues of direct concern to the SoW process at that moment. “*Schets 1988*” discussed among other matters the issue of confessional subscription.

The confessing of the first centuries and that of the sixteenth century will be the basis of the confessing of the reunited church, the Sketch indicated. It continued:

Those who wish to take part in full communion with the reunited church must be able to declare their convictions on this point. Such a declaration must have the character of our present public profession of faith. Those who accept a calling to office in the reunited church must moreover promise faithfulness to the *κοινωνία* of the church and perseverance in the work given them. Those who are exempted for a particular office,⁵⁷⁸ sign a declaration in the classical meeting in which they testify to a promise of obedience to Scripture as the only standard for doctrine and life and a promise of faithfulness to the *κοινωνία* of the church in communion with the confession of foregone generations.

This confession and its subscription, the Sketch continued, makes clear from which tradition one comes, with which one wishes to have spiritual solidarity, and the urgent need to proceed in the way of previous generations. One shall not only testify to the truth, one shall do it (John 3:21).

Therefore the church, for the sake of the credibility of the preaching and apostolicity, shall reject all that contradicts this confessing. History has taught that ecclesiastical declarations concerning what does and what does not belong to proper confessing, remains under tension. The battle for the truth cannot be won by simply literally repeating the words of former generations. The fathers were not concerned with placing a testimony *alongside* Scripture, that would function as a test for all generations, but a testimony *from* Scripture, which they with their children wanted to defend. But just as they were open to confessions of sister churches

⁵⁷⁷ *Gezamenlijke Vergadering...* 1984:251-257; SoW: 15-19.

⁵⁷⁸ The report does not state exempted from what. Given the context it would seem to mean ‘those who are exempted from securing their own income’. In the Dutch context traditionally professional office-bearers (ministers) are not ‘employed’ in the fiscal sense of the term: the church takes upon itself the responsibility for the upkeep of the office-bearer and his family and the minister makes all his time available to the church.

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from other countries so too there is, in the course of time, an openness towards up-to-date confessing in other situations.

We must therefore seek a form for our church, the Sketch indicated, in which truth and unity are both central values and seen as each other's complement. This is a heavy task for the local congregation. The burden of opposing views cannot always be carried within the ecclesiastical congregation. Variety in faith experience may well exceed the elasticity of a single geographical congregation. Therefore, the deputies concluded, there can be congregations of different colours in one region that co-operate as closely as possible.⁵⁷⁹

It is noteworthy that in the past, perforation of church boundaries had been considered a necessary evil. With this sketch, a theoretical justification was given for a practice that existed for many decades and the way had been paved for ecclesiastical unity to be primarily an issue at the classical level. As such, the SoW-process chose the middle road between the NHK (unity at the national level) and GKN[s] (unity at the local level).⁵⁸⁰

Also worth noting is that subscription had been divided into two parts: faithfulness to the confessing of the church and faithfulness to the community of the church. Faithfulness to the confessing of the church was demanded of all who wished to enjoy full membership privileges of the church. For local office bearers of the church, on this point no confirmation was required. Local office bearers were, however, required in addition to promise faithfulness to the community of the church. Those exempted from securing their own income, i.e. those who would live by the Gospel, were required to confirm both these promises in writing at the classical level.

Finally, the Sketch suggested that the fathers had not written confessions to operate *alongside* Scripture—as suggested by the common phrase ‘Scripture and confession’—but to operate *from* Scripture. The emphasis was placed not on the functioning of the product ‘confession’ as suggested by the preposition ‘alongside’, but the process ‘confessing’ as indicated by the preposition ‘from’. This suggests that old Ethical emphases were gaining the upper hand over Juridical emphases.

2.13.1.2.9 Elkaar Verstaan (Bos, Meijers, Weijland) 1991

In 1991, prominent figures in the NHK and GKN[s] published a book with essays on various topics relating to the SoW-process. Three of these were concerned in one or another way with the role of confessions in the church, and were written by Dr. H. B. Weijland, member of the GKN[s] and professor of church polity in Kampen (Koornmarkt), Rev. Dr. S. Meijers of Zeist, member of the *Gereformeerde Bond*, and Dr. G. Bos of Urk, the only minister who was member of both the *Gereformeerde Bond* and the *Confessionele Vereniging*. These essays might be considered to outline the theological basis of the practice of confessional subscription in what would become the PKN.

Weijland discussed the theme ‘dynamic binding to the confession’. He noted the following three reasons why Reformed confessions should be appreciated: (1) they express our fathers’ reactions to rediscovering God’s Word and grace; (2) not every generation has to start anew as a church; and (3) they are a doxology. The question may be asked whether confessing in the classical sense can keep pace with preaching. Some believe it can, because the confessions contain hard and fast truths. Others see in the role of confessions a return to a traditionalism from which the Reformers freed themselves. Weijland indicated that he considered the problem of this dilemma to be the rationalistic approach. A confession is a word from the heart, he noted. As such it has two movements: a contracting movement towards the kernel of the gospel message and an expanding

⁵⁷⁹ *Gezamenlijke Vergadering...* 1988.

⁵⁸⁰ It should be noted (1) that the term ‘church’ is not used anymore for the local congregation and (2) that the term ‘perforated’ had dropped from ecclesiastical practice, the terminology was now ‘preference church’.

movement as the last Word spoken on the issue, and that Word is free. It is in this double movement that one is preserved from both petrification and estrangement. In order to make this concrete, Weijland pointed to the term ‘dynamic binding’, which began to be used in the early 1970s as giving room to a more medical approach to solving conflicts. Weijland noted that various options have been tried in relation to binding:

1. a new confession, which failed because confessions must be born;
2. juridical binding, which failed because it created victims;
3. ‘spirit and main substance’ binding, which failed because it proved selective, subjective, and individualistic;
4. ‘*quatenus*’ binding, which failed because it left unclear why a church should have a confession; and
5. Van Ruler’s catholic-spiritual approach, which failed simply because no human can work in this way.

Weijland noted that the NHK then tried to use doctrinal discipline not as an ‘excommunication process’ but as a way of growing and of preventing others from stumbling. The GKN attempted to place doctrinal discipline in an ecumenical framework. The dynamic binding, Weijland alleged, combines these two elements of self-discipline and *κοινωνία*. It is an ellipse, he wrote, with these two focal points:

- a. Reformation doctrine concentrated to *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Gratia*, and *Sola Fide*. There are no ‘articles of doctrine’ but an attitude to life, operating from the centre of belonging to Christ to the periphery of confessing.
- b. One is bound to this doctrine in the sense that one’s personal convictions may be judged by it. One cannot propagate one’s own views without being willing to entertain those of others, for this would break the *κοινωνία* of the church.

Weijland pointed out that sound doctrine is important but does not guarantee faith. Furthermore, *κοινωνία* is a prerequisite for sound doctrine, not sound doctrine for *κοινωνία*. In closing, Weijland admitted that the term ‘dynamic binding’ might be unclear, but he had not been able to come up with a better term.

Meijers’ essay was entitled “Concerning the Importance of Confessional Writings”. Of interest is the fact that Meyers argued that Scripture should be seen as a book containing confessions and urging us to confess. Meijers thus felt content with the phrase ‘Scripture and Confession’. He noted that Scripture’s authority is two-fold: it testifies itself to its authority, and the Spirit in our heart testifies also to it. This makes clear that the testimonies of God and man intertwine. Meijers pointed out that ‘doctrine’ is a Scriptural concept. However, Scripture does not speak of ‘pure’ doctrine but ‘sound’ doctrine; it does not bring us a ‘system of doctrine’ but reveals to us ‘who God is’. Thus a confession as a summation of doctrine is about being ‘precise’, not about being ‘pure’. In spite of plurality in Scripture (four Gospels or the letters of Paul, Peter, James, and John) it forms a unity, the parts enriching the whole. One needs to see the whole to understand the parts before one can use the parts to correct and enrich the whole.

G. Bos entitled his essay “No Church without Confession”. In it he pleaded for more attention for the thoughts of J. H. Gunning jr. on confessions in the church. He warned that too much emphasis on confessions could turn people from speaking with God (prayer) to only speaking about God.

Thus Weijland continued to advocate his concept ‘dynamic binding’ in which he felt the two poles of apostolicity and *κοινωνία* were properly taken note of. Meijers emphasized that confessions must not be seen rationally as a summation of necessary doctrines or a system of doctrines, but organically as an expression of faith. Bos advocated a rethink on some of the points raised by J. H. Gunning jr. It is clear from the contributions of Meijers and Bos that a form of Ethicalism was being advocated. The ‘substance’ of confessing had been given a different definition. Weijland continued to work with the concept ‘substance’ of the confession in the traditional sense: he was more concerned about synthesizing confession and confessing, the

substance and the act. He achieved this by suggesting that neither the product (articulated confession) nor the process (act of confessing) but the attitude in the process of confessing is really the key issue: whether one seeks to reach out (apostolicity) and remain united with others (κοινωνία). This distinction is important, and one is left wondering whether even the authors of *Elkaar Verstaan* truly understood each other.⁵⁸¹

2.13.1.2.10 *Combi-synods of the 1990: the Church Order of the PKN*

On November 29, 1989 and February 14, 1990 the combi-synods met. Issues related to confessional subscription were not on the agenda. On October 25-27, 1990 the combi-synod met again, this time as trio-synod: the ELK had officially joined the SoW-process. The trio-synod held on January 31 and February 1, 1992, also did not discuss confessional subscription. The three trio-synods that followed, October 8-10, 1992, October 4-6, 1993 and November 12-13, 1993 did touch on the issue. At these trio-synods the first concrete drafts for the Church Order of the (re)united church were adopted. Initially this church order was known as the *Werkorde*.⁵⁸²

PKN—CO-2004 art. 1 and 12

Article 1.

1. *The Protestant Church in The Netherlands is in accordance with her confessing form of the one holy apostolic and catholic or general Christian church which, sharing in the expectation granted to Israel, reaches out to the coming of the Kingdom of God.*

2. *Living out of God's grace in Jesus Christ the church fulfils the mandate of her Lord to hear and to proclaim the Word.*

3. *Involved in God's turning to the world, the church confesses obedience to Holy Scripture as the only source and standard for ecclesiastical proclamation and service, the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*

4. *The confessing of the church takes place in communion with the confession of past generations, as it has been articulated,*

- *in the Apostolic Confession, the Confession of Nicea and the Confession of Athanasius—by which the church considers itself in communion with the general Christian church—*

- *in the unchanged Augsburg Confession and the Catechism of Luther—by which the church considers itself in communion with the Lutheran tradition—*

- *in the Catechism of Heidelberg, the Catechism of Geneva, and the Belgic Confession with the Canons of Dort—by which the church considers itself in communion with the Reformed tradition.*

5. *The church acknowledges the importance of the Theological Declaration of Barmen for confessing in the present.*

The church acknowledges with the Leuenberg Agreement that the Lutheran and Reformed traditions come together through a communal understanding of the Gospel.

6. *The church repeatedly confesses anew in its celebrating, speaking and acting Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour of the world and therewith calls to renewal of life in culture, society and state.*

The church testifies before people, powers and authorities of God's promises and commands and seeks in this discussion with other churches. ...

9. *In its testimony in word and deed the church is bound to proceed in the way of its confessing.*

10. *The church and all her members are called to test the confessing in the light of the Holy Scripture.*

11. *The church rejects that which contradicts its confessing.*

Article 12

5. *Supervision over confession and walk of members and office bearers and of those who fulfil another service is practised through pastoral discussion and admonition.*

⁵⁸¹ Vlijm and De Knijff, *Elkaar verstaan*.

⁵⁸² The term (re)united (in Dutch *verenigd* and *herenigd*) is used because the NHK and GKN[s] were considered to “reunite” while the participation of the ELK was not considered to be one of reunification but simple “union”. Because the churches disagreed about the name of the new church, the *Werkorde* is generally referred to as the *Werkorde SoW*. Initially the suggested name was “United Reformation Church in the Netherlands”, then it became “United Protestant Church in The Netherlands” and finally “Protestant Church in The Netherlands”. The *Werkorde SoW* should not be confused with the *Tussenorde SoW*, a church order which regulated the position of already

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The structure of this church order was as follows. The main church order consisted of a number articles (eventually 19). Each article was subdivided into a number of paragraphs. The articles of the church order contained basic principles, as such it is quasi-confessional. Appended to the church order was a set of fourteen ordinances related directly to the articles in the church order. These ordinances outlined how the basic principles found in the church order articles are to be executed.

The combi-synods of January 28-29, 1994 and January 25-27, 1996 did not deal with confessional subscription as such. The combi-synod of November 7-9, 1996 dealt with a paper on ecclesiology adopted by the General Assembly of the churches that had subscribed the Leuenberg Agreement. This paper described the task of Christians and churches as those of worship, witness, service and communion. These are the four marks mentioned by church fathers (the paper actually uses the Greek terms). ‘Confessing’ is not mentioned separately.

The combi-synod of January 22-25, 1997 adopted the ordinances relating to the *Werkorde*. Discussion was lively and there were many submissions.

Effectively, the adoption of these ordinances had prepared the way for the new association of churches to come into effect. What remained as yet were the decisions of the three separate churches to effect the merger. This proved more difficult than the leaders had thought and took several years.

The PKN’s attachment to its confessing was brought to expression in the first article of its church order. The twelfth article dealt with supervision over, among other things, the confession of members and office bearers. Various ordinances work out how supervision is to be exercised and

PKN—CO-2004 Ordinance 1 and 13

Ordinance 1: The confessing

Article 1. The confessing of the church and congregations

1. In the confessing of the church the congregations have communion with the confession of foregone generations, in which the Hervormde and Gereformeerde churches consider themselves to have a special association with the confessional writings of the Reformed tradition and the Evangelical-Lutheran congregation with the confessional writings of the Lutheran tradition.

2. The church acknowledges and respects these special associations of communion of the congregations.

3. The congregations acknowledge and respect the (special) associations of communion of other congregations with respect to the confessional writings and are called in obedience to the Word of God to persevere and to grow in the communal confessing of the church.

Article 4: Expression of the confession of the church

1. The general synod determines which expressions of the church besides the confessional writings mentioned in article 1-4 of the Church Order are to be marked as expressions of the confessing of the church.

2. The decision to mark an expression of the church as expression of the confessing of the church can be taken by the general synod only after the classical meetings, who have heard the church councils in their resort, and the Evangelical-Lutheran Synod have had the opportunity to consider it. As a rule she will also discuss this with other churches as applicable.

A decision of this nature requires a majority of two-thirds of the submitted valid votes.

Ordinance 13: The training and forming of preachers

Art. 19. The colloquium

4. The testimony is presented after the person involved has given the following promise and signed:

Do you accept the calling to the public preaching of the gospel, the administration of the sacraments and the pastoral care, and are you prepared in all your official labour to testify of salvation in Jesus Christ?

Do you promise in this to remain in the way of the confessing of the church in communion with the confession of former generations,

(to which, if the person involved request so, is be added:

therewith especially in communion with the confessional documents of the Reformed tradition, or:

therewith especially in communion with the confessional documents of the Lutheran tradition)?

Do you promise to abide by the rules, fixed in the order of the church?

merged congregations and federated congregations prior to the formation of the PKN.— *Gezamenlijke Vergadering...* 1992:103-104, 110, 211-213, 383-384

confessional subscription may be given form.

2.13.1.2.11 The Belhar Confession

During the course of the years in which the three individual church associations sought to effect the merger, combi-synods continued to be held. Of interest for this study is the combi-synod of December 1-2, 1999. The *Verenigende Gereformeerde Kerk in Suider-Afrika* (The Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa), itself a merger of two Reformed churches, had adopted the Belhar Confession as one of its confessional documents. It had submitted this confession to the SoW churches and asked them to see whether the Belhar Confession might be given a place among the confessions of the united church.

The combi-synod considered the Belhar Confession a prime example of the new dynamics of confessing, of confessing in a moment of need. It felt, however, that it could not make the Belhar Confession its own, for this confession was a cry from the heart born in a particular context and thus to be understood in that context. The combi-synod had not been able to decide how it might then function in a Dutch context. The conclusion thus reads as an admission of inadequacy:

In our circles the question is asked more and more frequently how we might give expression to *our* faith in an up-to-date, authentic and relevant way. In listening to the Confession of Belhar we feel embarrassment and shame, since we probably pay too little attention to the need of our society.⁵⁸³

2.13.1.2.12 Conclusion

In 1973, Weijland had urged the NHK and GKN[s] to search for a third way of regulating confessional subscription. Was this end achieved? It would seem that there were serious attempts to marry the two systems, though it would also seem that the NHK position dominated.

2.13.1.3 NHK: P. VAN DEN HEUVEL 2001

In 2001, Dr. P. van den Heuvel, lecturer in church polity for the *Hervormd Theologisch Wetenschappelijk Instituut* responsible for the training of ministers, published the second edition of his commentary on the NHK church order, also containing relevant jurisprudence. Twenty-six pages of this volume are dedicated to the issue of confessions and discipline (both doctrinal and ethical).

Van den Heuvel's publication proves that in one sense the NHK had come a long way since 1816. Its speaking on confessions had been refined—for example, phrases such as 'the way of confessing' and 'in communion with the fathers'—and distinctions were carefully made—for example, those between 'confessional writings' and 'act of confessing', between 'personal discipline' and 'doctrinal discipline'. However, in reality nothing had changed. Van den Heuvel himself concluded, "There would rather seem to be a fear to address each other truly with respect to the foundational questions of faith and confession" and opined that in the NHK the situation existed where everybody was granted room to hold their own convictions as long as they allowed others the same room. This reminds one of Rev. Dirk Molenaar's 1827 claim: anyone can preach from an NHK pulpit.⁵⁸⁴

Even if it does not operate in practice, the system the NHK had developed for exercising ecclesiastical discipline is nevertheless interesting. Rather than deal with an issue in a local setting, a doctrinal issue is immediately submitted to the supra-local ecclesiastical authority. Moreover, it is not considered without the explicit input of experts, which operate nationally. Another interesting point is that there are only two levels of official jurisdiction: the Provincial Assembly (advised by part of the Council for Issues of Church and Theology) and the Synod (advised by the

⁵⁸³ *Gezamenlijke Vergadering...* 1999:109.

⁵⁸⁴ Van den Heuvel, *De Hervormde KO*, 204-229

full Council). On this score, the procedure is much more clear-cut and streamlined than that envisaged by those operating under CO-1619 with FS-1619 or one of its successors.

In 2004, the Church Order of the PKN came into effect. This was accompanied by an official explanation of the Church Order, edited by the same P. van den Heuvel together with others. Chapter three is entitled “Confessing”. In chapter eleven the subjects supervision, concerns, and differences are dealt with, thus relating to Ordinances 10 and 12.⁵⁸⁵

Comparing Van den Heuvel’s commentary on the NHK church order with the official PKN church order commentary makes clear that the NHK approach had in general been sustained. The largest difference is structural, relating to the disappearance of provincial ecclesiastical assemblies and moving certain responsibilities—in the NHK perspective—from the national level to the classical level and—in the GKN[s] perspective—from the local level to the classical level. This substantiates the claim that in the PKN approach to confessions and subscription, the theoretical NHK line dominates.

Subscription in the PKN is identical to that practised in the NHK after 1951: a vow that is confirmed with a signature (Ord. 13-19-4).

2.13.2 ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

As far as the NHK and GKN[s] were concerned, there were primarily two Gordian knots that had to be unravelled or cut if the SoW process was to be a success. These were the role of confessions in the churches and the polity of the churches. This final paragraph critically reviews the process of reflection on confessions and subscription, and the final product.

From the start it must be said that the SoW-process has been a rather cumbersome, complex and initially rather poorly organized affair. In 1961 the ball began to roll, in 1968 it was given a massive push by younger members, and in 1973 the two synods of the churches met in a very informal way. The meeting was so informal and the drive so low that the body appointed to look into the matter was unclear about its mandate and unable to staff itself. Even after the structures had stabilized somewhat in 1976, the *ad hoc* character of the process remained evident. The momentous mandates on new confessions (1976) and a new catechism (1979) simply disappeared into thin air. Reports came in varying styles: *Samen Kerk Zijn* during the early 1980s and *Schetsen* during the late 1980s, and then proposals with respect to a concrete church order. While the ideas were more or less coherent, it would seem that the various committees and taskforces often got in each others’ way. In addition to all this, the minutes of the combi-synods are rather unclear in structure and not easy to research. All this may be illustrative of the temporary character of the SoW-process, and probably reflects the fact that no-one in 1973 realized it would take until 2004 for the two, later three, roads to merge into one. Because the SoW-process was somewhat disjointed, studying and tracing the development of confessional reflection in this environment is no small task.⁵⁸⁶ In the final analysis, in which a more topical approach is taken, this present study runs the risk of anachronism.

2.13.2.1 ECCLESIOLOGY

Key to SoW reflection on confessional subscription is ecclesiology. The volumes *Samen Kerk Zijn* make clear how fundamental this point was. Attention was focused on two elements of ecclesiology. The first of these related to the functions of the church: the church as apostolate and *κοινωνία*. It was especially with respect to the *κοινωνία* that the SoW struggled. *Κοινωνία*, it was agreed, is a duty for all members of the church. There must be faith in one another as members of the church. The *κοινωνία* is protected by each individual accepting his responsibility, and the community as a whole exercising tolerance. The interaction of the latter two—individual

⁵⁸⁵ Van den Heuvel, *Toelichting Kerkorde PKN*, 80-89, 224-244.

⁵⁸⁶ I have sorely missed the assistance of study such as that of Oostenbrink-Evers on the process that led to CO-1951.

responsibility and communal tolerance—in an environment of trust would lead to a proper form of being a church.

The second element related to the essence of the church: unity and plurality in the church. Reflection on the issue of confessing had made clear that unity was not a goal but a given. In fact, the unity of the church is itself a matter of confession. Unity should not be confused with uniformity. Nor should it be understood as a unity in convictions and positions, but a unity in the means of grace, in Word and sacraments. The unity of the church is original to the church, something given by God and not created by man. Alongside this unity there exists a practical plurality. This plurality, advocates of the SoW-process argued, already existed in the New Testament: the existence of four gospels and epistles of various sorts makes this clear. It was thought that ecclesiastical uniformity had been imposed on the church by political institutions for political ends, but was in fact foreign to the church. The essence of the church is not its struggle for uniformity but the way in which it deals with plurality. It was therefore seen as the task of the SoW process to make existing plurality in the churches functional: not a negative element but a positive element. Unity and plurality were not to be opposites but complementary.

To what extent have the SoW partners been able to achieve this? In 1984, the participants realized that pursuing unity and plurality at the local, congregational level might be asking too much. In 1988, it was admitted to be so, and thus room was created for confessionally-oriented local congregations and perforated church boundaries. Unity and plurality became complementary at the classical level; at the local level it proved to be impracticable. It would seem that this was not quite what the leaders had had in mind, but was considered the most that could be achieved. This is a vital point, since it would seem that this necessary blemish has been accepted as normal in the PKN.

2.13.2.2 CONFESSING

As a unified plural church focused on both the world out there and the community within, the PKN wants to be a confessing church. Its confessing character is described in the very first article of its church order, a change with respect to CO-1951, where apostolate was considered primary. What did the PKN understand under ‘being confessing’? Given the discussions on confessing and confession preceding CO-1951 and on the object of confessing in the report *God Met Ons*, to what extent does the PKN evidence something different or new? Furthermore, in 2.12 it was noted that the verb ‘confessing’ in NHK and in GKN[s] circles had a different connotation. Which connotation does it have in the PKN?

Confessing is defined as giving expression to the truth. Within the PKN, the concept ‘truth’ is officially not understood as ‘the way things are’ but as ‘the propriety of activity’. The truth is something that you do, advocates of the SoW explained, pointing to John 3:21. Scripture does not speak of *purity* in doctrine, a juridical concept, but *soundness* or *health* in doctrine, a medical concept.

With respect to ‘truth’ the PKN has chosen a slightly different approach from that advocated in the GKN[s] publication *God Met Ons*. The latter explained the truth as relational: neither objective nor subjective but the interaction of the two. As such the concept was still rationalistic: it tried to find a middle road between objective truth—how something out there sees the truth and communicates it to man—and subjective truth—how an individual man sees the truth being communicated to him. In the SoW process, the dilemma was not objectivism versus subjectivism but rationalism (the mind) versus Ethicalism (volition, activity). The end-result was a synthesis of the two, although the emphasis was more on the propriety of volition and action rather than the propriety of thought. For completeness’ sake, it is noted that the rationalistic element, to the extent that it is still present in the official documents of the PKN, seems to have continued in the GKN[s] tradition of *God Met Ons*.

Because the emphasis in confessing is on volition and action, the value of confessing is very much determined by its context, SoW advocates explained. It will not do to introduce African

confessions into a Dutch context, nor can one apply a sixteenth century confession in the twenty-first century. There is a duty for churches to take into consideration the lasting element in confessing: the church today experiences communion with the confessing of previous generations. On the other hand, new situations call for new measures, and thus there is also a mobile element in confessing. During the act of confessing, it is even possible for the PKN to decide that something should be expressed in writing and added to the collection of confessions left by foregone generations for the inspiration of future generations. How the ‘lasting’ and ‘mobile’ elements in confessing interact and work together is unclear. It could be the NHK approach where confessing of the past sets a formal example for confessing in the present, and confessing in the present provides the substance of confessing. It could also be that confessing of the past is substantively relevant as long as it has not been superseded by confessing in the present—the approach followed in the GKN[s]. Ostensibly, the latter is officially the case, though one suspects that the NHK approach will actually win out, just as in 1961 it proved impossible to introduce doctrinal discipline in any way resembling that intended by GS Dordrecht 1618-19.

At this point it should be noted that the debate over ‘confessing church’ and ‘confession church’ had dissipated. Decades of reflection had made clear that the dilemma ‘confessing church—confessional church’ was false: a confessing church has confessions and a church with confessions is by definition a confessing church. The problem, it was noted, was not the distinction, but caricatures and imbalance arising from the distinction. A confessing church that refused to be a confession church could not truly confess because the object of confessing was unclear. A confession church that does not confess is a monument, petrified. Such caricatures and abuses do not, however, negate the legitimacy of both confessing and confession.

In short, the PKN theoretically continued the NHK tradition of understanding confessing primarily in an ethical way, although it came to understand that the act of confessing does not exclude having confessional writings, thus giving room to the GKN[s] tradition of substantively holding to confessions.

In practice, however, PKN members continued in their varying views of confessing. Also with respect to ‘confessing’ there was room for disagreement. The Juridical Calvinist and Traditionalist stances were perpetuated by the *Gereformeerde Bond* and conservative circles within the GKN[s], though there was more emphasis than previously on the *κοινωνία* of the church. Moreover, Liberals continue to be opposed to the idea of being substantially bound to confessions. The PKN has not rid itself of what troubled the NHK for some two hundred years: when two say the same thing they need not mean the same thing. As in 1841 and 1842, ‘confessing’ remains an ill-defined concept.

Thus in answer to the question posed at the end of 2.12, the NHK ethical understanding of ‘confessing’ dominates, while the GKN[s] rationalist understanding of ‘confessing’ is given some room. Maybe this is a repeat of the union between Hoedemaker and Gunning jr. a century earlier.

2.13.2.3 SUBSCRIPTION

In the SoW-process, two lines of approach met each other. The NHK had a history of wanting to leave things open. Its confessing was especially focused on those outside, and thus the apostolate received added emphasis. In practice it meant that the NHK held to formal subscription: one is to confess (profess) with the fervour and attitude of the fathers. The GKN[s] had a history of wanting to tie everything into the system. Its confessing was especially focused on those inside, and thus the *κοινωνία* received added emphasis. In practice it meant that the GKN[s] traditionally practised substantial subscription, which approached literal subscription. The *Verklaring van Overeenstemming* hints at the difference when comparing Christ and the church to a light, which the GKN[s] shield in order to protect it while the NHK leave it open to all manner of attacks from the outside.

There was another difference. The NHK had taken its position after decades of reflection and was thus fairly settled in its position. The GKN[s] had negative experiences as a result of its

position and, discarding its tradition in the course of the 1960s and 1970s, had already begun looking at alternative approaches. As such, the GKN[s] was more likely to switch to the NHK position than the NHK to that of the GKN[s].

The question this poses is whether the position on confessional subscription chosen by the PKN was a synthesis of these two, a third alternative as suggested in 1973 by Weijland, or simply a reformulation of the position of the NHK. The answer to this question must be sought on two points. First of all, what does confessional subscription in the PKN mean substantively? Secondly, how does confessional subscription function in practice?

Regarding the substance of confessional subscription, it may be said that that which is to be subscribed has been greatly reduced. The taskforce *Kernen van Belijden* suggested four centres of confessing, thereby avoiding fundamental questions such as the existence of God. On this score, the PKN has in fact taken a position similar to that advocated by the Modernist J. H. Scholten during the mid-nineteenth century—he argued two centres of Reformed doctrine, the material principle of God’s sovereignty and the formal principle of divine revelation—though leaving room for those who wish to specify doctrine in more detail. The combination of Calvinist and Lutheran confessions is also an indicator of this reduction. Substantively, one can only hold to that on which these two confessions agree. In view of the fact that some of the Calvinist confessions challenge Lutheran doctrines, one would actually have to deny substantive parts of the confessions. The dialogue with Roman Catholics and the interest shown by Remonstrants and Mennonites in the SoW process is also an indicator that the PKN today is no longer convinced as foregone generations were of the need to be distinct. It is interesting to note that both in *Samen Kerk Zijn 1* and the *Verklaring van Overeenstemming* Groen van Prinsterer’s concept of an ‘unambiguous and broad-minded’ binding resurfaces. Arguably, subscription in the PKN is far from being unambiguous, however.

In view of the official papers of the PKN—a church order which speaks of confessing communion with foregone generations and proceeding in the way of confessing—the conclusion is warranted that, like the NHK in previous decades, the PKN was unwilling explicitly to outline the substance of its confessing. The Ordinances specify this somewhat by explaining that varying congregations may have ‘special associations’ with a particular confessional condition, and that candidates for the ministry may request to subscribe a particular confessional tradition. Thus a local congregation may enforce subscription to a particular confessional substance. However, a congregation is obliged to practice communion with other churches. This creates tension for the local churches, which in practice can only be resolved by turning a blind eye and hoping that the offensive element—a person or office bearer who errs in view of the specific confessional tradition—disappears as quickly as possible. It might be that this works today, since the Dutch have become specialized in individualism to such a degree that ‘Zaalberg’ and ‘Meyboom’ types of affairs would be denounced by most parties.

The conclusion is warranted that substantively the PKN has an undefined form of essential subscription. As such, with respect to the substantive side of subscription, the PKN has continued in the tradition of the NHK between 1816 and 1951.

With respect to the practice of confessional subscription, the story is somewhat different. Subscription for local office bearers was limited to an oral promise; the instrument of a signature beneath confessions or some formula had been rejected. For church office bearers with clear instructional mandates (ministers, catechetical instructors and lecturers in theology), subscription via a signature beneath a formula was required at the classical level. This formula also had the character of a promise. It is further interesting to note that at the local level one promised faithfulness to the confessing of the church, while at the classical level one also promised faithfulness to the κοινὴνία of the church. When compared with the tradition of Dort, what has been removed from the act of subscription is the act of confessing itself. A subscriber does not profess the faith confessed by the church but promises to teach the faith confessed by the church. Thus, theoretically the subscriber may not even have convictions identical to those of the church in

which he works. The position of the PKN is at this point very similar to that advocated by the Apologists in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The PKN has determined that doctrinal discipline is legitimate, and has regulated that suspension and deposition are part and parcel of doctrinal discipline. What has changed in relation to the tradition of Dort is the involvement of the local church council in doctrinal discipline. The PKN regulates that these are matters for the classis and the general synod, for the PKN had decided that confessionally-coloured local congregations were not a necessary evil but could be theologically justified, and thus in the PKN ecclesiastical unity is experienced not at the local level but the classical level. On this score, the PKN had chosen the middle road between the NHK, where doctrinal discipline had been a case for the general synod, and the GKN[s], where doctrinal discipline was initially a case for the local church council.

Finally, in 1971 the term ‘dynamic binding’ was introduced on to the ecclesiastical stage via a deputies’ report presented to a GKN[s] synod. In 1991, Prof. Dr. H. B. Weijland, one of the authors of the 1971 report, continued to defend this manner of subscription. The phrase ‘dynamic subscription’ attempts to give expression to the contracting and expanding movement within the sphere of confessing. One reaches out from the confession to the outer world, and one reaches from the outer world into the confession. This outward and inward movement might be characterized as reflection and dialogue on religious dogmas. Weijland considered this to be the middle road (if not a third way) between juridical and medical means of enforcing subscription. As Koffeman has noted, in practice it is a medical road.⁵⁸⁷ On this score, the PKN has continued in the Ethical path set out on by the NHK in 1951.

In short, the PKN practises a form of subscription in which the medical means of maintaining the confession and *κοινωνία* are used to their utmost, and only when these fail will the PKN resort to juridical means. Basically, the PKN has adopted a combination of the NHK approach followed by a form of the GKN[s] approach. Whether the PKN will ever reach a stage where the GKN[s] approach is followed remains to be seen.

In the final analysis, subscription in the PKN is no longer subscription to the confession of the church. It has become subscription to the communion of the church, a declaration of solidarity without a clearly defined substance. As such, confessional subscription in the PKN is attitudinal.

2.13.2.4 CONCLUSION

Reflection on confessional subscription in the SoW process, disjointed as it may have been, was one of great importance in Dutch Reformed circles. Two traditions that had parted ways on the issue of confessional subscription grappled together with the issue, and with the wisdom of experience sought a new way out of their predicament. The SoW process has ‘confessionalized’ the NHK even further than 1951 had. In 1951, the NHK recognized its duty to be a confessing church, and in 2004 the NHK as partner in the PKN accepted a duty to discipline those who do not abide by the confessing of the church. The SoW-process has brought the GKN[s] out of its confessionalist approach, developing a methodology for dealing with confessional aberrations that synthesizes medical and juridical instruments.

Although substantively the SoW-process has hollowed out the confessional character of the PKN, the refinement of procedures warrant close scrutiny. The impression is gained that structurally the PKN has progressed where GS Dordrecht 1619 was called to a halt in the heat of the battle. CO-1619 and FS-1619 make clear that doctrinal discipline must be exercised, and indicate where such discipline terminates if there is no repentance. However, the documents of 1619 and the tradition that followed had not developed a clear procedure by which doctrinal discipline might be exercised.

⁵⁸⁷ Koffeman, *Weijland*, 19.

2.14 Reflection in Orthodox Reformed Circles, 1960 to Today

Reflections on confessional subscription in the NHK and GKN[s] were reviewed separately in 2.12. The interaction of the NHK and GKN[s] positions in the SoW-process was reviewed in 2.13. This chapter examines reflection in the more orthodox Reformed circles, the smaller associations of Reformed churches and organizations such as the *Gereformeerde Bond*. The concern is with further developments in what has been termed the Calvinist camp.

The examination begins with a brief overview of this camp (2.14.1), then a review of events and publications within this camp after 1960 (2.14.2). This will be followed by an analysis (2.14.3) and conclusion (2.14.4).

2.14.1 THE CALVINIST CAMP IN 1960 AND BEYOND

What has been dubbed the Calvinist Camp in this study was spread over a number of associations of churches in 1960.

The most conservative, tending to hyper-Calvinism, were the three associations of *Gereformeerde Gemeenten*, the GGNA, the OGG and the GGN. These were churches with their roots primarily in the Secession of 1834 who refused to unite with other Seceders in 1869.

Besides these, there were the CGKN with their roots also primarily in 1834, who continued as an association in 1892 by refusing to join the *Dolerenden* at the formation of the GKN. Within the CGKN there were three wings: a small, more evangelical or progressive wing; a large, moderate, traditional wing; and a sizeable conservative wing known as *Bewaar het Pand*, this last having great affinity with the *Gereformeerde Gemeenten*.

The GKN had split in 1944 into what was referred to as the GKN[*synodalen*] and GKN[*vrijgemaakten*]. The GKN[s] has been described in 2.12.1. The GKN(v) had seceded from the GKN on primarily two issues: the competencies of major assemblies and binding to certain doctrinal declarations which, in the eyes of the GKN(v), did not articulate necessary articles of faith but rather *theologoumena*.

In the NHK, the Calvinist Camp might be considered to consist of three parties: the *Gereformeerde Bond*, the *Kohlbruggianen*, and the *Confessionele Vereniging*. In 1981, a popular church magazine was started, *Het Gekrookte Riet*, and those associated with that formed a fourth party. *Het Gekrookte Riet* represents a theological current similar to that found in *Gereformeerde Gemeenten*, i.e. further to the 'right' than the *Gereformeerde Bond*. With the formation of the PKN in 2004, *Het Gekrookte Riet* became associated with the HHK, and since the magazine became part of the HHK's official organ, *Hervormd Kerkblad*, it has ceased to exist.

At this stage, mention should be made that in the late 1960s a new association of churches was formed following struggles in the GKN(v). This became the more independently-structured association of *Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken* (NGK—Netherlands Reformed Churches). Within the GGNA a breach took place in the early 1980s, but this is of no consequence for this present study.

In Dutch Reformed circles the terms *Gereformeerde Gezindte* (Reformed Persuasion) and *Kleine Oecumene* (Small Ecumenicity) are used variously to indicate segments or the whole of the Calvinist Camp. The term *Gereformeerde Gezindte* generally, but not always, refers to the whole of what has been referred to as the Calvinist Camp.⁵⁸⁸ The *Gereformeerde Gezindte* has a voice of its own in its *Contact Orgaan Gereformeerde Gezindte*, a non-ecclesiastical platform for discussion and debate. Participants in the COGG are the CGKN, the CV, the *Gereformeerde Bond*, the GGN, the OGG, and the NGK. In 2001, the GKN[s] were excluded, to be replaced by the organization *Confessioneel Gereformeerd Beraad*, the conservative wing in the GKN[s]. Since the

⁵⁸⁸ For an account of the main lines in its history see Golverdingen, *Gereformeerde Gezindte*.

exclusion of the GKN[s], the GKN(v) have become more involved. The vGKN now participates as well.

The *Kleine Oecumene* usually refers to the GKN(v), the CGKN and the NGK, though some would plead for inclusion of the GGNA as well, and the *Gereformeerde Bond*. Within the *Kleine Oecumene*, the GKN(v), CGKN and NGK are seriously pursuing organizational unification. At a local level, there are congregations from two or all three associations of churches that co-operate closely. At the national level, the GKN(v) and CGKN also enjoy a close relationship, while the GKN(v) and CGKN both experience a somewhat strained relationship with the NGK.

2.14.2 EVENTS AND PUBLICATIONS

As early as in the late 1950s, serious polemics developed in the GKN(v) over, among other things, the issue of confessional subscription. It would eventually lead to a church schism in the GKN(v). This forms the starting point for the review in this section (2.14.2.1). Then the course of events in relation to confessional subscription in the CGKN will be outlined (2.14.2.2). A wide variety of publications will be reviewed in chronological order to gain an impression of various stances within the Calvinist Camp and how these were legitimized (2.14.2.3-10). In 1999, a conference with speakers from various churches was held on the issue of believing and confessing in a postmodern age (2.14.2.11). Ecclesiastical reflection on confessional subscription in the CGKN will be examined, culminating in the report adopted by GS Leeuwarden-Nunspeet 2001 and published in 2003 (2.14.2.12). In closing, two documents produced in GKN(v) circles in 2004 will be considered, both of which are not confessions in a church political sense but nevertheless function as quasi-confessional documents (2.14.2.13).

2.14.2.1 GKN(v) AND NGK

During the late 1960s, a number of churches and persons found themselves excluded from the GKN(v), an action that eventually led to the formation of the NGK. One of the key issues in this schism was confessional subscription; even today it is the key factor in the continued separation between the GKN(v) and CGKN associations and the NGK.

2.14.2.1.1 Historical overview⁵⁸⁹

On Reformation Day 1966, a number of church leaders in the GKN(v) published a public letter in which they protested against certain elements in GKN(v) church life and expressed support for Rev. A. van der Ziel of Groningen, who had been suspended for independently pursuing reunification with the GKN[s]. On account of this public letter, the course of events is often referred to as the *Open Brief zaak* (Public Letter affair).

One of the matters addressed in the public letter was the correctness of confessional subscription as practised in the GKN(v). This particular doubt had its source in a number of issues.

The most prominent concerned reunification with the GKN[s]. GS Utrecht 1959-60 of the GKN[s] had decided to set aside the doctrinal declaration of the early 1940s. This, signatories of the public letter argued, opened the way for reunification with the GKN[s]. Yet GS Assen 1961 of the GKN(v) had decided the way was not open. Van der Ziel acted contrary to this decision and was suspended from office for this. GS Rotterdam-Delfshaven 1965 considered his suspension from office justified.

A second issue concerned the practice of confessional subscription in Breda, where FS-1619 was not used but a form of their own making. In addition, Rev. B. Telder, emeritus minister of Breda, had in two publications defended a doctrine akin to soul sleep. When some pointed out that this doctrine was contrary to what the church confesses in HC LD 22, Telder responded that the matter confessed there was of a secondary nature and therefore not binding.

⁵⁸⁹ See Bos, *Na 1945*, 91-125; www.ngk.nl.

A third issue concerned the teachings of Rev. L. E. Oosterhoff of Beverwijk, which were clearly not in line with the Three Forms of Unity.

A fourth issue became the question of whether someone whose loyalty to the confession was in doubt could be seated at ecclesiastical assemblies. In 1967, Rev. B. J. F. Schoep was delegated to GS Amerfoort-West by PS Noord-Holland. Schoep was drafter and co-signer of the public letter that was considered by many to draw into question the loyalty to the confession of the signatories of the letter (see 2.14.2.1.7).

Within the association of churches these issues resulted in schism. Throughout the country, local churches, and sometimes a classis or even a particular synod, decided not to consider the decisions of GS Amersfoort-West 1967 binding regarding the *Open Brief*. Thereupon, delegates of dissenting ecclesiastical assemblies were no longer received at the broader assembly, and local churches siding with the dissenters were considered to be ‘excluded from the association’ on account of breach of contract for association, the Church Order.

These churches, roughly one hundred in number, united into an association of churches of a more independent character. Confessional subscription was effectively made a local issue, as a result of which several churches changed the practice. In the early 1970s, these churches adopted the name *Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken*, together with a new church order, known as the *Akkoord voor Kerkelijk Samenleving* (AKS - Agreement for Ecclesiastical Community). The schism is often referred to as the *Open Brief* (Public Letter) or the *Buitenverband* (Excluded from the Association) affair.

Connected with this issue there has been an overwhelming amount of literature, especially in two magazines, *De Reformatie* and *Opbouw*. It is not possible to review everything in the pages of this study, and therefore consideration will be limited to broad publications of key-players in the debate, as well as a report produced in 1995 by deputies of the GKN(v) dealing with the GKN(v) and NGK stances on confessional subscription and recent developments in the NGK. This will give sufficient acquaintance with the factors in the debate and the progress of reflection.

2.14.2.1.2 GKN(v): Kamphuis 1960-61

In 1960, Rev. J. Kamphuis, professor of ecclesiology in Kampen (Broederweg), published an article in *De Reformatie* on the form of subscription entitled “The Given Word”, initiated by the publication of Telder’s first book and an article by a certain G. Goossens. A response by Goossens led to a further seven articles on the matter. As editor of *De Reformatie*, Kamphuis frequently wrote on confessional subscription during the 1960s, and the products of his pen—to the point, principled and supported with detailed historiography—played an important role in forming the thoughts of many GKN(v) members on the issues.

In the initial article, Kamphuis briefly reviewed the history of forms of subscription in The Netherlands. He noted that the return to FS-1619 in the nineteenth century had not been an act of undue enslavement but simply a confirmation of the church’s amen. It is the form of subscription, he noted, that prevents the church from disintegrating into a confession-less community.

Goossens had suggested that the church had never wanted to bind absolutely to ecclesiastical papers. Moreover, he had pointed out that FS-1619 prescribed that deviating views should be reported to either the consistory *or* a broader assembly; thus Telder was under no obligation, once he had made his views known to the consistory of Breda, to have his views discussed by a classis. Kamphuis responded that the original FS-1619 spoke of consistory *and* broader assemblies. He admitted that the intention was not for a minister to go to all assemblies. The consistory may suffice. However, if the view considered to be deviating goes further than the local congregation, as was the case with Telder who published a book, the broader assemblies should be involved. Kamphuis warned against a spirit of confessional individualism, on the local church level as well.

In subsequent articles, Kamphuis discussed the history of the phrase “consistory, classis and/or synod”. He pointed out that the original provincial forms of subscription did not even list the consistory. He felt that this bypassing of the consistory was primarily because consistories were

not considered capable of judging doctrinal issues. He also pointed out that the term that was originally “and” became “or” at GS Dordrecht 1618-19 and, it would seem on account of an error when typesetting the form of subscription, became “and” again when the linguistically revised edition of the church order was published in 1905.⁵⁹⁰

The ‘and-or’ discussion of Kamphuis and Goossens may seem pedantic, but it touched a crucial issue in the whole debate. If one defends the autonomy of local churches in the line of Kuyper, which role does the association of churches play in regard to confessional maintenance? Goossens argued in favour of the prominence of the consistory, while Kamphuis tried to walk the middle road between congregationalism and collegialism.

2.14.2.1.3 GKN(v): Wiskerke 1962-1963

Rev. J. R. Wiskerke of Middelburg was another prominent figure advocating the stance that came to prevail in the GKN(v). In 1962 and 1963 he published a five part article in *Lucerna*, which served as a theological and academic journal in the GKN(v). His essay not only focused on issues being debated within the GKN(v), but also sought to reflect more broadly on the issue of confessing.

Wiskerke began by noting that a confession is a human writing that derives its contents from Scripture. It is thus no ‘confiction’ (a thought of the human heart) but a ‘confession’ (the amen to what the believing heart has learned to hear in God’s rock solid words of promise). He noted, pointing to Matt. 10:32, that confessing and outreach go hand in hand: preaching is in fact confessing. Wiskerke further discussed the matters of biblicism and dogmatism (or confessionalism). With respect to the former, he noted that it fails to recognize the mandate to confess. With respect to the latter, he noted that a confession must always be founded on Scripture: neither the intent of the original author nor the original context but Scripture determines the meaning of the confession. He pointed out that a definition will never be complete or perfect, yet this does not mean that it is impossible to define a matter. Confessing, Wiskerke indicated, is a matter of (1) heralding an objective message from God, in which (2) human beings serve as means, and where the message is (3) aimed at faith (trust) of the audience.

Wiskerke clearly did not look at the issues superficially but brought the discussion to a deeper level. He indicated that a confession must not just be read at face value. He gave interesting insights into the issues that were prominent in his time, especially the relationship between confessing and apostolate and preaching.

Wiskerke’s strength is that he outlines how the substance of confessions is contextually marked. This strength is at the same time his weakness, for Wiskerke’s comments in regard to the confessions are themselves contextually tainted. For example, his understanding of the concept ‘confession’ is determined in part by lexicographical considerations—Wiskerke makes much of the fact that *ὁμολογία* etymologically means ‘to say the same’. Moreover, his emphasis on reading a confession in the light of Scripture rather than the original context betray, it may be said, anti-historical and biblicist tendencies.⁵⁹¹

2.14.2.1.4 NGK and GKN(v): Vonk and Wiskerke 1964

In 1964, Rev. C. Vonk of Schiedam and Rev. J. R. Wiskerke of Middelburg were engaged in a polemic on the role of confessions in the church. This polemic is representative of the many debates that were being waged with the pen. They breathe an air of mistrust and are filled with innuendoes and caricatures. Both Vonk and Wiskerke were prominent leaders and prolific writers.

The polemic started with a private publication by Vonk in 1964 entitled *Remaining Faithful*. He questioned how and to what extent a minister might critique the confessions. He did not consider a

⁵⁹⁰ Kamphuis, "Het gegeven woord".

⁵⁹¹ Wiskerke, "Confessie".

gravamen always necessary, and warned against confessional perfectionism. In his publication, Vonk used a number of his objections to the Heidelberg Catechism for illustration; he mentioned that the church council of Schiedam had approved his publishing these objections.⁵⁹²

Wiskerke responded to this publication in a two-part article in *De Reformatie*. He pointed out that ministers, by signing FS-1905, testify to their agreement with the doctrine of the church and promise to teach this doctrine. According to Wiskerke, this promise is equivalent to an oath. Further, the act of confessing and having confessional documents is one and the same thing, and confessional documents prevent the church and its members from detracting from the essentials. In the second instalment of his article, Wiskerke discussed what faithfulness to the confession implies and what a minister should do if he has doubts. In the course of his article he looked at the concept 'the substance of the confession'. He understood 'substance' in this context not to mean 'essence' as opposed to 'accidentals', but to mean 'material' as opposed to 'form'. In closing, Wiskerke indicated that it is insufficient to have only the local church council involved in a doctrinal matter; not the church council of Schiedam alone, but broader ecclesiastical assemblies should have looked at the criticism that Vonk had of the confessions.⁵⁹³

Vonk did not leave Wiskerke's response unanswered. In 1964 he published a second tract entitled *The Substance of the Catechism (as the Ancient Gereformeerden spoke of it)*. Vonk objected to the way in which Wiskerke distinguished between the form and the substance of the confessions. Vonk further pointed out that a *gravamen* might be dealt with by a consistory, classis or synod, and thus felt he had acted appropriately. Vonk's main concern was that the confession would become an idol.⁵⁹⁴

Wiskerke responded in 1966 to Vonk's response with a series of six articles entitled "The Substance of the Substance Misery". Wiskerke phrased his response in terms of ten points, most of which dealt with matters of a personal nature or further discussion of some of the points of criticism Vonk had with respect to the Catechism. Of interest for this present study are the eighth and tenth points, which deal with matters touching confessional subscription as a whole. In the eighth point, Wiskerke argued that Vonk's use of the word 'substance' was not the traditional use of the term. In the tenth point, Wiskerke, appealing to Kuyper (2.9.2.6, *Revisie der Revisie Legende*), noted that in the end the general synod would be involved in an objection to the confession.⁵⁹⁵

A century earlier, Gunning and Groen van Prinsterer had been engaged in a noble polemic on confessional subscription. While the differences between the sparring partners then were much greater than in the 1960s, the polemic Vonk-Wiskerke might well be typified as ignoble, filled with exclamation marks and vituperative accusations as they were. The heated tone of this debate makes clear that confessional subscription as an issue lies close to the heart of being a church in the experience of the orthodox reformed. It demonstrates that there is more to this issue than juridical or rational considerations.

2.14.2.1.5 GKN(v): Schilder 1964-65

Another prominent figure in the debate was Rev. H. J. Schilder, professor of Old Testament at Kampen (Broederweg). During his candidacy exam, H. J. Schilder had refused to subscribe the doctrinal declarations of 1943 and therewith had been refused admission to the pulpit. Like his uncle, Dr. K. Schilder, H. J. Schilder was averse to extra-confessional binding. During the 1960s, it became clear that he was not averse to confessional subscription as such. In 1965, he published a

⁵⁹² Vonk, *Trouw*.

⁵⁹³ Wiskerke, "Trouw".

⁵⁹⁴ Vonk, *Substantie*.

⁵⁹⁵ Wiskerke, "Substantie".

series of articles in *De Reformatie* on confessional subscription in which he addressed the most crucial issues being debated.

Schilder's articles touched on a number of key issues in the debate. Among other things, Schilder argued that, before professing one's faith, one must be acquainted with all the substance of the confessions of the church. He illustrated this with the imagery of emigration. When one travels abroad, he noted, one takes along a dictionary. But if one settles in another country, one learns the language. The confession is not a dictionary, which one pulls from the bookcase when necessary, but something one knows and lives.⁵⁹⁶

In general, he defended the Juridical Calvinist stance, although his position did betray some idiosyncrasies, for example his idea that the six confessional documents of the GKN(v) are equal in all respects, and that the Canons of Dort might be read for edification at the dinner table.⁵⁹⁷

2.14.2.1.6 NGK: Doornbos 1966-67

Rev. K. Doornbos of Wormer was one of the more prominent figures among the dissenting faction. He had strong congregationalist inclinations, which also had consequences for his opinion concerning confessional subscription. After the schism, Doornbos became an authority in the NGK on church political matters. During a series of articles in *Opbouw* on the church order, Doornbos also discussed the form of subscription. This article is a typical example of the NGK position on confessional subscription. Doornbos' article evidences frustration with FS-1619, and carries with it a condescending tone. Its strength lies in its criticism of FS-1619. He is appreciative of the first part of the form, but has serious problems with the stipulations found in the second half. In his opinion, FS-1619 did not allow for correcting a confession should someone with objections be right. The weakness of Doornbos' article is that it fails to suggest an alternative. Also somewhat surprising is the fact that Doornbos, an advocate of substantive subscription of the less strict sort, takes FS-1619 so literally. Is this because a church orderly stipulation and a confession are two different genres? It is at least clear that subscription to confessions and subscription to a church order are two very different matters for Doornbos.⁵⁹⁸

2.14.2.1.7 General Synods 1967 and 1969-70

In 1967, PS Noord-Holland delegated Rev. B. J. F. Schoep of Amstelveen to go to General Synod. Schoep had been the main force behind the public letter written in support of Van der Ziel. Once synod had been constituted, all members were asked to indicate their agreement with the Reformed confession by rising. Schoep also rose. However, the validity of his testimony was challenged by the delegates from PS Drenthe, who had received specific instructions by the particular synod to do so. Thus the first issue with which GS Amersfoort-West 1967 was confronted was one concerning confessional fidelity. The synod decided that there was a discrepancy between Schoep's opinions expressed in the *Open Brief* and his agreement with the reformed confessions and concluded that Schoep could not be seated as a member of synod. Two delegates from Noord-Holland, Schoep and Rev. H van Ommen of Zaandam, thereupon left the synod. The matter returned when PS Noord Holland requested the synod to reconsider the seating of Schoep. The synod, however, upheld its decision: the *Open Brief* casted doubt on whether the Three Forms of Unity were identical to the foundation of the Christian church, and therefore Schoep's confessional fidelity was questionable.⁵⁹⁹

By 1969, tensions in the province Noord Holland had reached a point where two particular synods had formed. Those supporting the *Open Brief* signatories were referred to as PS Noord

⁵⁹⁶ Schilder, "Binding".

⁵⁹⁷ Dutch Reformed Christians have the custom of reading a portion from Scripture at the close of every meal.

⁵⁹⁸ Doornbos, "Aantekeningen".

⁵⁹⁹ *Acta...GKN(v)*... 1967, art. 7-19, 149, 161 and 162. I point out that questions concerning Schoep's loyalty to the confessions were directly linked to his rising and not (as one might also have expected) to the credential letter.

Holland A (Wormer), and those opposed as PS Noord Holland B (IJmuiden). Both synods sent delegates to GS Hoogeveen 1969. Thus the synod first of all had to decide which delegation to accept as representing PS Noord Holland. General Synod decided to seat the delegates of PS Noord Holland B (IJmuiden). The delegates from PS Noord Holland A (Wormer) were therefore refused access to the synod floor. Throughout the Dutch nation, GKN(v)s were forced to choose for or against synod's decision. Those who did not feel at ease with synod's decision were considered to be in breach of the church order and therefore considered to be 'excluded from the association'.⁶⁰⁰

GS Hattem 1972 was requested to initiate reunion talks with the churches 'excluded from the association'. Synod was also requested to respond to the rebuttal of charges officially adopted by Classis Amsterdam (excluded from the association). GS Hattem decided not to do either.⁶⁰¹

Those GKN(v)s excluded from the association regrouped, and in 1972 they adopted a more autonomist church order, the AKS, and eventually adopted the name NGK.

2.14.2.1.8 GKN(v): Revision of the Church Order⁶⁰²

During the 1970s, the GKN(v) decided to revise their church order. Among the changes introduced was mandatory subscription for elders and deacons, including a form of subscription that was adopted for all churches. At the same time, the form of subscription for ministers was linguistically revised. In substance, FS-1905 and FS-1978 may be considered identical.

With this revision, something new seems to have come about. Prior to 1978, ministers signed FS-1905 at the classis, and locally signed the adopted form of subscription for elders and deacons (if it existed). Ministers thus signed locally as elders of the congregation. In 1979, the GKN[s] would regulate this practice (see 2.12.2.7.10). In the GKN(v), however, FS-1978 was to be used both classically and locally for ministers. Thus it came to be that ministers were now to subscribe the same form locally and classically, and were distinguished from elders and deacons in what they signed.⁶⁰³

GKN(v)—CO-1978 art. 53-54 and FS-1978

53. The ministers, professors and other lecturers at the Theological College shall subscribe the Three Forms of Unity of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, to which end the forms shall be used that have been determined for the various services. Ministers who refuse shall as a result thereof be immediately suspended and the classis shall not receive them.

If after discussion concerning their sentiments they continue to refuse they shall be deposed.

54. Also the elders and the deacons shall subscribe the referred to Forms of Unity, to which the appropriate form shall be used.

⁶⁰⁰ *Acta...GKN(v)... 1969-70, art. 29.*

⁶⁰¹ *Acta...GKN(v)... 1972, art. 217 and 218.*

⁶⁰² For a history of all the changes see Te Velde, *Documentatie-boek*.

⁶⁰³ There is confusion within the GKN(v) on what ministers should be subscribing at the local level. On the hand the acts of GS Groningen-Zuid consistently speak of a form of subscription for ministers and for elders and deacons. On the other hand, the text of the form of subscription for ministers as printed in the acts would suggest that this form was only intended for use at the classical level, even though the form that follows is clearly for use by elders and deacons only (*Acta...GKN(v)...1978, art. 213*). Thus the form for ministers as found in an authoritative publication corrects the text for the form for ministers (Bouma, *Kerkorde GKN(v)*, art. 53). In my opinion, the prescribed practice is that ministers sign almost identical forms for the classis and local church, while elders and deacons sign a different form.

GKN(v)—FS-1978

We, the undersigned, ministers of the Word with the Gereformeerde Kerk of ... (or: within the classis of ...), declare sincerely and in good conscience before the Lord, that we from the heart are convinced that the doctrine of the three forms of unity—the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort—in all parts agree completely with the Word of God.

We promise therefore diligently to teach and faithfully to defend this doctrine without publicly or in any other way, be it directly or not, teaching or publishing what is contrary to it. We further promise that we will not only reject every error contrary to this doctrine, but shall also refute, oppose and help ward them off.

Should we ever have our doubts against this doctrine or come to hold a deviating opinion, we promise that we will neither publicly nor in any other way propose or defend such, be it orally or in writing, but that we will submit our sentiments in the ecclesiastical way to the ecclesiastical assemblies for examination.

We promise that we are always ready to submit with a willing spirit to the judgement of these ecclesiastical assemblies. If we act contrary to this, we shall as a result be immediately suspended.

Should the church council, the classis or a synod for well-founded reasons, in order to preserve the unity and purity in the doctrine, ever demand a further explanation of our sentiments concerning any part of this doctrine, we promise that we will always be prepared to do so.

If we do not keep this promise, we shall also be suspended, without loosing the right of appeal in case of objection. During the time of the appeal we shall conduct ourselves according to the decision of the narrower assembly.

We, the undersigned, elders and deacons of the Gereformeerde Kerk of ..., declare sincerely and in good conscience before the Lord, that we from the heart are convinced that the doctrine of the three forms of unity—the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort—in all parts agree completely with the Word of God.

We promise therefore that we, each according to his own office will diligently teach and faithfully defend this doctrine and will reject every error contrary to this doctrine.

Should we ever have our doubts against this doctrine or come to hold a deviating opinion, we promise that we will neither publicly nor in any other way propose or defend such, but that we will submit our sentiments to the church council for examination.

We promise that we are always ready to submit with a willing spirit to the judgement of these ecclesiastical assemblies. If we act contrary to this, we shall as a result be immediately suspended.

Should the church council for founded reasons, in order to preserve the unity and purity in the doctrine, ever demand a further explanation of our sentiments concerning any part of this doctrine, we promise that we will always be prepared to do so.

If we do not keep this promise, we shall also be suspended, without loosing the right of appeal in case of objection. During the time of the appeal we shall conduct ourselves according to the decision of the church council.

2.14.2.1.9 NGK: AKS and Forms of Subscription

In 1974 the NGK had adopted the following statement.

Just as since the days of the Reformation of the sixteenth century the unity of the churches first of all at bottom consisted in the same faith, in obedience to the Word of the God and in the communal confession, so too the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands, assembled in this assembly, as if anew promise each other—giving themselves first to the Lord and then to each other—to abide by the Word of God and the confession of the church of all ages. They declare that they find the ground for their unity and communion in that confessing of the truth of Holy Scripture, as expressed in the forms of the Early Christian church and in the Three Forms of Unity.⁶⁰⁴

During the course of the 1970s, the NGK decided that a total revision of their AKS was required. At the NM Breukelen 1981-82, the NGK adopted an article, article 17, prescribing subscription. The article followed the line of subscription as prescribed in CO-1619. It should be noted,

⁶⁰⁴ NGK, *Besluiten NGK 1974 & 1976*, 11.

Historical Part

NGK—AKS-1981 art. 17

17. Subscribing the Forms of Unity

Office bearers shall subscribe the Three Forms of Unity (namely: the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort) as proof of their agreement with the doctrine of the church. If an office bearer refuses to subscribe or no longer stands considers himself accountable for his subscription, the exercise of his office shall be suspended, until he has further explained himself to the satisfaction of his church council. The church council shall report this to and, if desired, give further detailed account for this to the sister churches, assembled in the regional assembly. Also those who have been declared eligible for call, or who have received the right to speak an edifying word, shall by means of subscribing the three Forms of Unity in that assembly testify of their agreement with the doctrine of the church.

NGK—AKS-2004 art. 17

17. Signing the Forms of Unity

Signing the three Forms of Unity (that is, the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort) will show agreement with the doctrine of the church.

This agreement is required after the installation of an office bearer and after the regional examination for license to exhort, a call to the ministry or admission to the office of minister.

He who refuses to sign the three Forms of Unity or is no longer able to abide by them must give full explanation to his church council. Until the church council is satisfied with this explanation he shall be suspended from practising his office, exhorting to churches or being eligible for a call to the ministry. The church council shall inform the congregation and the sister churches and, if desired, give a more detailed account of this matter.

NGK—FS-1994

17-1 form of subscription for Ministers of the Word
We, the undersigned, ministers of the divine Word in the Netherlands Reformed Churches belonging to the region ..., declare uprightly and with a clear conscience before God the following:

We heartily acknowledge the Holy Scripture to be the trustworthy and divinely inspired Word as the only rule for faith and life.

We acknowledge the three general confessional documents and the three Forms of Unity as faithful instruction in and defence of the truth of Scripture, and accept them on account of their agreement with God's Word as testimony of our faith and guideline for our official ministry, to wit the preaching of the gospel, the maintenance of the straight doctrine and the defence and fighting off of erring doctrine.

The congregation of God, pillar and foundation of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15), lives by the gospel, as it has been delivered to her (1 Cor. 15:1-5).

Hence, if ever our understanding of the Holy Scripture, the gospel of Jesus Christ, should come to depart from what the doctrine of the church has decided, we promise that we shall not teach our opinion, but in advance explain it to the church council and thereafter, if need be, the regional assembly to test it according to God's Word and after discussion to issue a declaration.

Moreover, if the church council and thereafter, if need be, a regional assembly, out of concern for the unity and purity of doctrine, should require a further explanation of our opinion concerning any part of the named confessional documents, we are prepared to do so.

We promise to subject ourselves to the judgement of the church council or the regional assembly, on punishment of de facto being deposed from our ministry, maintaining the right of appeal to the national assembly if we are of the opinion that the declaration made is not right before God, while we will be satisfied with the decision while our appeal is being dealt with.

Thus we will endeavour the preserve the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3) and we trust that the Spirit of the truth will point out to us the way of the full truth (John 16:13).

Scripture places: 1 Cor 15:1,2; Gal. 1:9; Gal. 2:2; Eph. 3:17b-19; Phil. 1:9,10; 1 Thess. 5:19,20; 1 Tim 4:16; Tit 1:7-9; 2 Pet. 1:20; 2 John :9.

however, that AKS art. 17 was, like other AKS articles, not mandatory. The AKS advised churches to use the procedure of subscription, but did not enforce it. Thus, because it was up to the individual churches to draw up their own form of subscription, the NGK deviated from the practice that followed out of CO-1619.⁶⁰⁵

However, NM Apeldoorn 1994, urged thereto by discussions with the GKN(v) and CGKN, did adopt a form of subscription. This form was in effect appended to article 17 of the AKS. Because of the character of the AKS, this form too was not obligatory. In the minutes of the National Meeting one thus reads:

The National Meeting Apeldoorn 1994/95 of the NGK ...

Considering that

- both with a view to avoiding lack of clarity regarding the spiritual character of binding to confessional documents as well as with a view to the good relationship with other churches of reformed character here and abroad it is desirable to introduce a form of subscription for ministers of the Word

- there are serious objections within the NGK against the obligatory prescription of a certain form

- whether one does or does not use a form of subscription as such does not involve faithfulness to the confession as such

decides to fix the form of subscription ... and urgently advise the churches to make use thereof.⁶⁰⁶

Thus, strictly speaking, the position of the NGK had not changed. Subscription was commendable, but not enforced.

NM Lelystad 2004 revised the AKS again. Article 17 was among the articles changed.⁶⁰⁷ The old article 17 was purely about subscription and the duties of the subscribed. The new article was expanded with some pointers on how in situations of suspension the local church was to act with respect to the local congregation and the sister churches in the region. This article evidences a step away from the more radical congregationalism found in the NGK at first. The local church is held accountable not only to the congregation but also to the sister-churches. However, as long as the AKS functions in an advisory capacity, strictly speaking this article is a paper tiger. Only those local NGKs that decide to hold to the AKS stand in the tradition of Dort.

2.14.2.1.10 GKN(v): Rapport DKE 1995

In the course of time, the GKN(v) and NGK sought to overcome their differences and explore avenues towards reunification. The two issues that separated them concerned church polity and confessional subscription. In 1995, GKN(v) *deputaten Kerkelijke Eenheid* (DKE—deputies for Church Unity) submitted a report to GS Berkel en Rodenrijs 1996 in which they set out the standpoints of the NGK as formulated by their *Comissie voor Contact en Samenspreking* (CCS—Committee for Contact and Discussion) and the GKN(v) as formulated by DKE. The discussions between the two parties were conducted in a brotherly atmosphere, very different from the heated debates of the 1960s. However, it became clear to all concerned that there were indeed essential differences between the two associations of churches. The following review is limited to the issue of confessional subscription, and makes use not of the minutes of discussions held, but of the position papers published as appendices to the report.

The first two appendices list the points that the CCS and DKE believed required discussion. The CCS noted that the NGK and GKN(v) shared a communal confession. Within the NGK the

⁶⁰⁵ *Landelijke Vergadering...NGK...* 1981-1982: art. 123-148.

⁶⁰⁶ *Landelijke Vergadering...NGK...* 1994-95:4. For minutes of the lively discussion on adoption of this article see 5-25.

⁶⁰⁷ *Landelijke Vergadering...NGK...* 2004:12.

confession was primarily seen as a means to live close to God, it was not a formal body of authority alongside God's Word. As a result, the NGK would not simply say 'Scripture and confession' but a phrase such as 'Scripture, and in agreement therewith the confession.' The confession may not be a filter for Scripture. Within the NGK there also existed the impression that much in the confessions was coloured by the philosophies in existence when they were written. DKE noted that the GKN(v) were especially concerned about the level of tolerance in the NGK and the large measure of congregationalism.

The third appendix, a position paper written by DKE, dealt with the authority and use of confessional writings as well as confessional subscription. In general, it defended what was previously referred to as the Juridical Calvinist position. The CCS wrote a response to this, and followed up with a position paper of their own. While they expressed appreciation for the stance of the DKE, they felt the emphasis was too much on conforming to an adopted set of confessions. Their response makes clear that the CCS continued to be afraid of a strict confessionalism. To their way of thinking, doctrinal discipline tended to thwart rather than further the cause of Christ.

In another position paper, DKE looked at the issue of church polity. It was noted that the congregationalist tendencies of the NGK drew into question whether loyalty to the confessions was sufficiently maintained. DKE also mentioned their impression that there was an aversion within the NGK to the term 'reformed' in expressions such as 'reformed doctrine' and 'reformed religion'; is this, DKE asked, because church members are only required to hold to the Apostles' Creed?⁶⁰⁸

Upon receiving this report, GS Berkel en Rodenrijs 1996 concluded that the practice of confessional subscription in the NGK continued to be an impediment to closer contact with the NGK. It was found that there was too much freedom within the NGK when it came to the confession, and that there was insufficient warrant for a broad-minded and unambiguous binding to the confession. The GKN(v) called upon the NGK to reconsider its practice of confessional subscription. LV Doorn 1998 of the NGK decided not to give heed to this call.⁶⁰⁹

Because the GKN(v) saw confessional subscription as one of the major hurdles to reunification with the NGK, many aspects of confessional subscription, some in minute detail, were seriously considered by the persons conducting the investigative meetings. In view of the fact that these documents were produced in the process of fulfilling ecclesiastical mandates, they are more than mere personal or factional views of confessional subscription. On the other hand, they should not be equated with official ecclesiastical documents. Their importance lies especially in the fact that they clarify positions on some of the issues.

2.14.2.1.11 Analysis of Distinctions between GKN(v) and NGK

In this final subsection are analysed the stances of the GKN(v) and NGK, as evidenced in the debates of the 1960s, and their practices as outlined in the report of 1995.

The Character of Subscription

Both the GKN(v) and the NGK consider their view of confessional subscription to fall within the bounds of Groen van Prinsterer's 'broad-minded and unambiguous'. In view of the fact that the GKN(v) consider the NGK position too tolerant, and the NGK consider the GKN(v) position too strict, it is again clear that the phrase is used so broadly as to be ambiguous in Dutch Reformed circles.

With respect to the character of binding, both the NGK and the GKN(v) theoretically advocate substantive binding, although quantitatively there would be more confessional substance for the GKN(v) than for the NGK. Thus, from a GKN(v) point of view, the NGK binding inclines towards

⁶⁰⁸ Deputaten Kerkelijke Eenheid, *Rapport*.

⁶⁰⁹ *Acta...GKN(v)...1996*, art. 82. *Landelijke Vergadering...NGK...1998*, art. 82 (text consulted via www.ngk.nl).

‘essential’, whereas from an NGK point of view, the GKN(v) tends towards confessionalism. With respect to this dilemma three things may be said.

In the first place, it should be clear that the church not only judges the confessions but also judges the characteristics of aspects of the confession. The church itself decides what is ‘substantive’ in its confession and what is not. It would appear that participants on both sides of the debate neglected to take this into account. This is clear on three points. First of all, there was no clarity on what the ‘church’ is: could this be just the consistory (Vonk and Doornbos) or is the church all assemblies (Kamphuis, Wiskerke, and Schilder). Secondly, if a minor assembly considers a matter closed (e.g. the consistory in the case of Telder), would it still need to be addressed by the major assemblies? Thirdly, who determines whether a publication should be ecclesiastically approved? Wiskerke and Schilder felt that some publications of Telder and Vonk should have been submitted to ecclesiastical assemblies. However, it is apparent that Wiskerke and Schilder did not do so with their own articles either, even though they too voiced criticism of the confessions.⁶¹⁰

Secondly, the issue was raised whether confessions should be perfected or not. Those eventually excluded from the GKN(v) argued that the confessions should not be perfected, afraid that this would lead to confessionalism. Those that remained in the GKN(v) argued that all the little problems ought to be ironed out of the confessions. This debate was similar to that between Berkouwer and Praamsma in the GKN[s]. It is further interesting to note that the GKN(v), with the exception of removing the Johannine comma as proof-text for the Trinity from article 9 of the Belgic Confession, have never perfected their confession.⁶¹¹

Thirdly, as with Groen van Prinsterer’s stance, it would seem that the literal-substantive-essential binding framework fails also in this debate. Both the GKN(v) and NGK consider their binding to be ‘broad-minded and unambiguous’. Is not the solution to be sought in another direction?

Who is bound?

Another point of difference between the GKN(v) and NGK concerns the extent to which ordinary church members and office bearers are bound to the confessions. The GKN(v) have a scheme: one is bound to the extent that one is able to know and understand, and must develop in the line of the confession. H. J. Schilder even argued that such knowledge must extend to all the confessions, and that therefore those wishing to become members in full standing of the GKN(v) must be fully acquainted with all the confessions of the church. The NGK tends to operate with two levels: ordinary church members were bound to the Apostles’ Creed, and office bearers to the Three Forms of Unity.

Is Subscription an Oath?

Attention is further drawn to the debate on whether subscribing a confession may be considered an oath. Vonk’s objection was basically that Scripture discourages if not forbids the use of oaths by Christians: let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’. Wiskerke responded that the oath was proper in the circumstances, and added that not keeping this oath was evidence of a breach of the accord of communion.

Objective and Subjective Sides to Confessions

The GKN(v) and NGK positions are fundamentally determined by their varying approaches to the confessions. Although both attempt to synthesize the objective and subjective aspects of a confession, when placed alongside each other it is clear that the GKN(v) tend to emphasize the

⁶¹⁰ Wiskerke on BC art. 1 and Schilder on HC LD 34.

⁶¹¹ Another change, though not accompanied by a marginal note in the official edition of the GKN(v) version of the Belgic Confession, is that Hebrews is no longer attributed to Paul. The Canadian Reformed Churches, a ‘daughter’ of the GKN(v) in North America, on the other hand, did to a large extent emend. Thus, for example, ‘the two *tables* of the law’ has disappeared from HC LD 34.

objective, divine side to confessions, while the NGK tend to emphasize the subjective, human side to confessions. This same factor plays a role in the exercise of church discipline. The GKN(v) are more convinced of the guidance of the Holy Spirit in their ecclesiastical assemblies and thus are more bold in exercising discipline, while the NGK place more emphasis on humans being prone to err, and as a result are very reluctant to exercise discipline. On this point, one might say that on the issue of doctrinal discipline the NGK represent the more medical approach while the GKN(v) represent the more juridical.

The Two Associations of Churches Individually

Turning to the two associations of churches individually, a small movement in the GKN(v) with respect to confessional faithfulness can be discerned. In the DKE position paper on confessional subscription, it is implied that an office bearer who holds views that do not accord with the confessions may serve as office bearer as long as they teach in accordance with the confessions. This contrasts with the decision of GS Den Haag 1914, which stated that those who hold deviating views, while they may be admitted to the Lord's Table, shall not serve as office bearers in the church. Of interest is also the fact that the GKN(v) considered it impossible to distinguish between 'fundamental' and 'non-fundamental' matters in the confessions. This is curious given that GS Den Haag 1914 considered there were fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines in the confessions, with infant baptism considered to be non-fundamental. Finally, it is generally held in the GKN(v) that a *gravamen* should be dealt with by all ecclesiastical assemblies.

The NGK position on confessional subscription is complicated by their position on church polity. The DKE noted in their report that while they had faith in the CCS members, it could not be said that the CCS position represented the view of all the NGK congregations and assemblies since the NGK did not bind to ecclesiastical decisions. Thus, even if the NGK decided in their broadest assembly on a wording for a form of subscription, this still did not mean that it was used in all local churches. On the other hand, the introduction of FS-2004 would suggest that in the NGK there has been a step towards the original practice. In the NGK there is thus individual and congregational subscription.⁶¹² It is also worth noting that the NGK continued to point out to the GKN(v) that the church must be open to revising and renewing its confessions, and that a *gravamen* is inadequate to achieve this in all respects.

Conclusion

The differences between the GKN(v) and the NGK make clear how extreme the consequences of differing views on confessional subscription can be. The continued separation between these two associations of churches, in spite of the fact that in theory both claim to hold the same position, suggests that the issue needs to be viewed from a different perspective.

2.14.2.2 CGKN: OFFICIAL CHANGES

The CGKN church order underwent a thorough revision in 1947. In that year the word 'church' was made plural in the name of the association: *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk in Nederland* became *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*. The article on subscription was now article 52 in the church order. The form of subscription remained substantially unchanged.⁶¹³

⁶¹² This is why at a national level, the GKN(v), NGK and CGKN have troubles federating, while at a local level unity can even extend to the merging of congregations.

⁶¹³ The reason for the name change was not of a principle nature but of a practical nature. Up until that moment a local church was referred to as "*gemeente*". However, the term "*gemeente*" was also becoming more commonly used as designation for a local municipality (see the English: shire, town, city). To avoid confusion, the term "*kerk*" began to be used also for the local church. See *Acta...CGKN... 1947*, art. 115.

Historical Part

CGKN—CO-1957/1966 art. 52-53 and FS-1947/1966

Art. 52: Subscription of the forms by ministers and professors

The ministers of the Word, as well as the professors in theology and lecturers at the Theological University shall testify of their agreement with the Three Forms of Unity by signing the binding form which exists for that purpose. Those ministers who refuse to do so shall be de facto suspended in their ministry by the church council or the classis, until, after discussion, they are prepared to subscribe. If they stubbornly continue to refuse, they shall be completely deposed from their office.

Art. 53: Subscription by Elders and Deacons

In the same way also the elders and deacons, when accepting their office, shall testify of their agreement with the three forms of unity by subscribing in a meeting of the church council the binding form intended for them.

Form of subscription for ministers of the Word

We, the undersigned, ministers of the divine Word resorting under Classis ..., declare sincerely and in good conscience before the Lord, by this our subscription, that we from the heart consider and believe that all the articles and points of doctrine contained in the Three Forms of Unity agree in everything with the Word of God. We promise that we shall diligently teach and faithfully defend this doctrine without publicly or privately, directly or indirectly teaching or writing anything against this doctrine. We also declare not only that we shall reject all errors contrary to this doctrine, but also that we also are inclined to refute and fight them off and to do everything, to keep them out of the Churches. And if ever any objection or deviant consideration with respect to this doctrine should arise with us, we promise that we will neither publicly nor privately exposit, teach or defend this, be it in preaching or writing, but we will first reveal this view to the Church Council, the Classis or the Synod so that it may be examined there, in which case we are always ready to submit with a willing spirit to the judgement of the Church Council, Classis or Synod, under penalty of suspension from ministry. If the Church Council, Classis or Synod should ever on account of serious reasons, in order to preserve the unity and purity of doctrine, would desire a further declaration regarding our considerations about any article of the Three Forms of Unity, we promise also, that we are always ready to do so, under the same aforementioned penalty, reserving the right of appeal if we should believe that we have been grieved by the decision of the Church Council, Classis or Synod, while during this time of appeal we will be satisfied with the decision of the provincial synod

[Finally we promise to act in everything according to the current Church Order and further stipulations and decisions of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland. Added in 1966]

Form of subscription for elders and deacons (prior to 1966)

We, the undersigned, elders and deacons of the Church of ... declare sincerely and in good conscience before the Lord, that we from the heart consider and believe, that all the articles and points of doctrine contained in the Three Forms of Unity agree in everything with the Word of God; therefore promise, that we will defend this doctrine faithfully, subjecting ourselves to the current Church Order, under penalty of being removed from office.

Form of subscription for elders and deacons (after 1966)

We, the undersigned, elders and deacons of the church of ..., declare sincerely and in good conscience before the Lord, by this subscription, that we from the heart consider and believe that all the articles and points of doctrine contained in the Confession and Catechism of the Reformed Dutch Churches together with the declaration on some points of aforesaid doctrine made in the National Synod held at Dordrecht in 1619 agree in everything with the Word of God. We promise therefore diligently to teach and faithfully to defend aforementioned doctrine without publicly or privately, directly or indirectly teaching or writing anything against this doctrine. We also not only reject all errors contrary to this doctrine especially those condemned by aforementioned synod, but we also are desirous to refute and oppose them and do everything to ward them out of the church. And if it should happen that we should gain any different consideration or sentiment against aforementioned doctrine, we promise that we will neither publicly nor privately propose, teach or defend such; that we will first reveal this view to the church council, classis or synod so that it may be examined, always ready to submit to the judgement of the church council, classis or synod; under penalty that if we act in a contrary way, we are by that very fact (ipso facto) suspended from our ministries. And if the church council, classis or synod should ever on account of serious reasons for second thoughts, in order to preserve the unity and sincerity of doctrine, should consider it proper to ask of us that we explain more fully our opinion about any articles of this confession, catechism or of the declaration of the national synod, so we promise also by this, to be always ready and willing to such a request at all times, under the penalty as stated above, Reserving however to ourselves the right of appeal if we should believe that we have been grieved by the sentence of the church council, classis or synod, during which time of appeal we will be satisfied with the declaration of the provincial synod. Finally we promise to act in everything according to the current Church Order and further stipulations and decisions of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland.

In 1962, a regional synod, having observed that several church councils were acting contrary to the church order and were refusing to submit such matters to the appropriate assemblies, requested the synod to add a paragraph on subscription to the church order to the form of subscription for ministers. The synod acquiesced to this request.⁶¹⁴

While the form of subscription for ministers had been constantly updated, that for elders and deacons had not. In 1968, the CGKN decided to update the form for elders and deacons and bring it into line with that for ministers.⁶¹⁵

A request from a regional synod in 1986 linguistically to revise the forms of subscription was rejected.⁶¹⁶ In 2001, the church order was again thoroughly revised. Besides minor linguistic changes in articles 53 and 54 it was decided explicitly to state which are the three Forms of Unity.⁶¹⁷

Further, a new form of subscription was adopted for elders and deacons.⁶¹⁸

2.14.2.3 CGKN: VAN GENDEREN 1971 AND 1975

In 1971, Dr. J. van Genderen, professor in dogmatics at the CGKN seminary in Apeldoorn, published a small booklet in which he commented on current debates on the Reformed confessions; it seems to have served especially as a corrective to Augustijn's 1969 publication. In 1975, he published a second booklet on the relationship between confessions and the science of theology.⁶¹⁹ The two publications are interesting because they indicate, first of all, that Van Genderen's views had essentially not changed since 1955 (2.11.2.6). Secondly, the CGKN was one of the associations of churches in which the role of confessions was not generally or publicly drawn into

CGKN—FS-1999 for elders and deacons

We, the undersigned, elders and deacons of the church at ..., declare sincerely and in good conscience before the Lord, with this subscription that we from the heart consider and believe that all the articles and points of doctrine contained in the Three forms of unity, agree in everything with the Word of God.

We promise diligently to teach and faithfully to defend this doctrine without publicly or privately, directly or indirectly teaching or writing anything against it.

We further declare that we not only reject all errors contrary to this doctrine but that we are also inclined to refute and oppose them and make every effort to help ward them out of the churches.

And if ever there should rise with us any objection or deviant sentiment with respect to this doctrine, we promise that we will neither publicly nor privately propose, teach, or defend it, but we will first reveal this view to the consistory, the classis or the synod so that it may be examined there, in which case we are always ready to submit with a willing spirit to the judgement of the church council, classis or synod, under penalty that, if we have acted contrary to this, we are with the deed (ipso facto) suspended from the ministries.

If the consistory, classis or synod should ever on account of serious reasons, in order to preserve the unity and purity of doctrine, request a further explanation of our sentiment concerning any article of the Three forms of unity, so we promise, to be ready and willing to respond to such a request at all times, under the same penalty stated above, reserving the right of appeal if we should believe that we have been grieved by the declaration of the church council, classis or synod, during which time of appeal we will be satisfied with the declaration of the particular synod.

Finally we promise to act in everything according to the Church Order in force and further regulations and decisions of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland.

⁶¹⁴ *Acta...CGKN...* 1962, art. 116, 178.

⁶¹⁵ *Acta...CGKN...* 1968-69, art. 155.—I have not been able to discover how this decision could already be found in a church order published in 1967.

⁶¹⁶ *Acta...CGKN...* 1986, art. 39.

⁶¹⁷ *Acta...CGKN...* 2001, art. 222 and bijl. 65.

⁶¹⁸ Identical texts are found in the 1999 and the 2004 editions of the CGKN church order, I have not been able to discover when exactly this form of subscription was changed.

⁶¹⁹ Not in the sense of 'systematic theology' but the whole field, encompassing such sciences as exegesis, hermeneutics, dogmatics, pastoral theology, church history, and church polity.

question, implying that Van Genderen could look more objectively and abstractly as these issues were being hotly debated in NHK, GKN[s], GKN(v), and NGK circles. There are a few points of detail worth noting explicitly.

Firstly, Van Genderen argued that Augustijn ignored the fact that confessions are statements of the faith of the church and not *per se* answers to questions asked of it by the world. Thus Van Genderen emphasized the legitimacy of continuing to confess what has been confessed before.

Secondly, Van Genderen criticized Augustijn for making a confession a statement of ‘what do I believe’ rather than ‘what ought I believe’. This implies that Van Genderen viewed a confession as a standard for faith, and posits a tension between the characteristics of a confession as ‘echo’ and ‘amen’ by emphasizing the former at the possible expense of the latter.

Thirdly, Van Genderen gives a description of prophetic liberty that is rather vague. According to Van Genderen, activities within the limits of prophetic liberty can affect the whole of theology, and yet theology is standardized by the confessions. This raises a number of questions. Do confessional subscription and prophetic liberty not bite one another here? Are confessional subscription and prophetic liberty two sides to the same coin? Or are there confessional elements that also fall within the bounds of prophetic liberty?⁶²⁰

2.14.2.4 NHK—GEREFORMEERDE BOND: GRAAFLAND 1974-75

In 1974, the editors of *De Waarheidsvriend*, journal for the *Gereformeerde Bond* in the NHK, requested Dr. C. Graafland of Utrecht to write a series of articles on confessing and confessions. The reasons for this request were continued displeasure within the *Gereformeerde Bond* regarding confessional subscription in the NHK, the charge that the *Gereformeerde Bond* represented dead orthodoxy, and discussions surrounding the *Geloofsgetuigenis* adopted in the GKN[s].⁶²¹

The series of articles was published in thirteen instalments spread over two years. They represent the consolidated and well-considered views of the Juridical Calvinists in the NHK. It should be noted that the articles did not cover the whole field of confessional subscription. For example, nothing was said about how confessions ought to be maintained or about what one precisely subscribes in a confession. Graafland’s articles were very much determined by the discussion surrounding the verb ‘to confess’ and the noun ‘confession’. It is from this angle that he looked at the whole issue of confessions in the church.

It is interesting to note how Graafland fought a battle on two fronts. The first front was against the liberals in the NHK, the other front was of confessionalist fellow members of the *Gereformeerde Bond*. Thus Graafland was continually trying to outline the middle road. In doing so, he followed the well-trodden paths of those before him (especially Groen van Prinsterer and Severijn).

Graafland explained the switch from confession to confessing as a result of a paradigm shift in thought processes as one from ontology to functionality. This is especially worthy of note. It is indeed true that following World War II more attention was being paid to functionality than ontology. Since confessions tend to be about how things are, interest in confessions is decreasing, Graafland suggested. His explanation is plausible, though it should be noted that confessions are not only about how things are. The Heidelberg Catechism begins with a functional rather than ontological question and answer.

On the point of renewed confessing, Graafland notes (a) they are *born* not *made* and (b) they are always born in a struggle over the same central message of Scripture: God saves man. This, of course, would tremendously restrict the confession-writing activity of the church.

⁶²⁰ Van Genderen, *Reformatrische Belijdenis*. Van Genderen, *Confessie en Theologie*.

⁶²¹ The Gereformeerde Bond also published an official response to the *Geloofsgetuigenis* written by Graafland: Graafland, *Bezinning*.

Graafland's raised a number of points on the basis of the New Testament. These tended to be the traditional ones, though it is interesting to note how Graafland also considered it necessary to pay attention to the term 'witness'. This makes sense for an NHK member: the concept of 'communion' is hardly noted and certainly not stressed in the articles, as it would have been done by an orthodox Calvinist outside the NHK. It is also interesting to note how Graafland follows an etymological route to connect the Greek *ὁμολογέω* mainly with the objective side of confessing, and a lexical route to connect the Greek *μαρτυρία* mainly with the subjective side of confessing. In Graafland's process of coming to a biblical understanding of confessions, etymology plays a vital role.⁶²²

2.14.2.5 NGK: DE JONG, VELEMA AND VAN OMMEN 1975

Due to perceived confessional unfaithfulness in the GKN[s], Rev. Dr. M. J. Arntzen had left the GKN[s] and joined the NGK. However, the situation in the NGK was not to his liking either and so, in 1975, he left those 'excluded from the association' to join those 'within the association', the GKN(v). Rev. H. de Jong considered this moment an opportune time to write on the identity of the NGK. He did so in an article in *Opbouw* entitled "Scripture-movement and confession-movement." It became a series of articles after Rev. J. H. Velema, minister of the CGKN in Apeldoorn, and Rev. H. van Ommen, minister of the NGK in Arnhem, reacted somewhat negatively to Rev. De Jong's initial article in the pages of *Opbouw*.⁶²³

This exchange of views does not really add to the understanding of the various positions. It does, however, give a good impression of the strained atmosphere as the dust settled over the 1960s. De Jong accused the GKN(v) of drifting towards confessionalism, Van Ommen considered the struggle of the 1960s to have been a battle against confessionalism, and Velema implied that De Jong's stance closely approaches biblicism. It is evident that this discussion took place in an environment of distrust and suspicion. De Jong's reactions to Velema's condemnation and Van Ommen's questions make clear how this up-and-coming leader within the NGK tried to paint the fine line between overrating and underrating the confessions. A recurring problem of such discussions is clear here: although all stand more or less in the 'centre', those to the 'left' suspect the 'right' of 'confessionalism' and those to the 'right' suspect the 'left' of biblicism. It would seem that the atmosphere of the 1970s was too charged for this to be taken note of properly.

De Jong made the point that a new way of looking at Scripture—he was here referring to the struggle of the 1930s: a historical approach to Scripture as opposed to a scholastic or moralistic approach—could result in new treasures from the store of Scripture. Because confessions are products of their time, the findings of new exegesis will not always correlate with exegetical points in the confessions. As a result, a new exegesis may be true to Scripture but not entirely true to the confession. Although De Jong did not clearly state it as such, he was basically saying that no allowance was being made for this fact in the issue of maintaining confessions.

2.14.2.6 GKN(v): TRIMP 1983

In 1983, the student association of Kampen (Broederweg) included in its annual almanac an essay by Dr. C. Trimp, professor in diaconology (pastoral theology) at Kampen (Broederweg). The essay bore the title "Purpose and Function of the Confession."

In opposition to subjectivism, Trimp emphasized that confessions are first and foremost ecclesiastical testimonies of faith. They only have meaning in the life of a person if that person is a member of the confessing community. This position differs from earlier orthodox reformed suggestions that confessions are not to be considered standards for faith, for confessions are the

⁶²² Graafland, "Belijden en Belijdenis".

⁶²³ The initial material is found in De Jong, "Schrift-beweging of belijdenis-beweging". See further De Jong, "Schrift of Belijdenis".

words mother (the church) speaks in order to teach her children (believers) to speak. On this point Trimp actually echoed Van Velzen, who had indicated that confessions are guides not only to what should be confessed but also how these matters should be confessed. Though Trimp duly takes note of the fallibility of confessions and the need to have Scripture alone function as the touchstone, his emphasis on the communal (ecclesiastical) nature of confessions, their important role in reading Scripture, and the weight of their age implies a high view of confessional writings.⁶²⁴

2.14.2.7 GKN(v): DE BOER 1984

In 1984, theological student E. A. de Boer published an article in *Radix* in which he looked at the relationship between theological research and confession and dogma.

De Boer's essay presented definitions that have consequences for distinguishing between the various types of ecclesiastical doctrinal documents. In De Boer's framework, doctrinal declarations are dogmas but not confessional. His definition questions the classification of the Canons of Dort, which were primarily directed inwardly (the Remonstrants were members of the Reformed churches) and cannot be considered a summary of doctrine.

Due note is also to be taken of De Boer's warning not to be guided in one's view of confessions by a particular approach to the processes of time. For it is true that confessions were often relegated to the sidelines because of the thought that the old is inferior to the new. However, there is also the position that suggests that concrete confessions are no longer relevant (see Da Costa or Augustijn). It would have been helpful if De Boer had also looked at the question whether it is responsible to distance oneself from a sharp dogmatic formulation in the past given a new context.⁶²⁵

2.14.2.8 NGK: VAN DER DUSSEN 1984

In 1984, Rev. A. van der Dussen, minister of the NGK of Haarlem, published a five-part article entitled "The Functioning of the Confession" in *Opbouw*. The article has its origins in discussions between the NGK and the CGKN.

Van der Dussen article was a prime apology of the NGK position on confessional subscription. It indicated that in principle the NGK as a whole were not opposed to the idea, but felt more attention should be paid to the nuances. In essence, the concerns that Da Costa had already expressed in the mid-nineteenth century were repeated here. In view of Van der Dussen's article, one may well wonder why the NGK, with over ten years of history by this stage, had not yet attempted to draft an up-to-date confession.

There are three points to highlight from his article. First of all, Van der Dussen attempted to address the problem of the relevance of confessions, especially the problem he had on this score with the Three Forms of Unity. His point might have been well made, though it is interesting to note that the Ecumenical Creeds (especially the Athanasian Creed) were not drawn into this discussion.

Secondly, Van der Dussen compared confessions to buoys that mark out navigable waters in a channel. He argued that one might move beyond the boundaries of the confession just as a skipper might sometimes have to move beyond the buoys. This brings a new element into the debate. In the Dutch context, it is indeed true that a skipper might need to move beyond the buoys, especially with its many tidal flats. As such, this imagery is not contrary to the line of Dort. What Van der

⁶²⁴ Trimp, "Zin en Functie".

⁶²⁵ De Boer, "Geloof onder Woorden". —For example, Groen van Prinsterer found the confessional expressions on the doctrine of predestination appropriate in the early seventeenth century but inappropriate in the nineteenth century. In the same way one might say that the Canons of Dort could well do with an update so as to address twenty-first century Arminian Evangelicalism more directly.

Dussen did not address was who determines the legitimacy of moving beyond the buoys, and whether, once there, the ship has run aground or not.

Thirdly, Van der Dussen gave an interpretation of Groen's phrase 'broad-minded and unambiguous' which presumed what Groen himself denied, namely that there is tension in the field of confessional subscription. Moreover, Van der Dussen's appeal to the power of the Spirit reminds one more of Gunning's approach to confessional subscription than Groen's. It would seem that Van der Dussen did Groen an injustice on this score.⁶²⁶

2.14.2.9 CGKN: G. C. DEN HERTOOG 1987

In 1987, Dr. G. C. den Hertog, then minister, later professor of ethics and apologetics at the CGKN university in Apeldoorn, published an essay entitled "Necessity or Virtue? On the Time-relatedness of Scripture, Confession and Theology" in a compendium of essays on confession and theology in general. Parts of his essay address the issue of confessing.

Den Hertog's focus was very limited: the relationship between time and a confessional writing, or rather its relevance. His essay is of value as a serious attempt to seek a way out of the problem of having 'divine eternal truths' being brought to expression by 'human time-bound souls'. Should not the church be allowed to remould its confessional heritage in new confessional documents? Den Hertog's limited focus had also its drawback, for it failed to take into account the various other functions that confessions fulfil such as the doxological and didactic. To what extent is the doxological character of a confession time-related, especially in view of the eternity of God?

Den Hertog's comments concerning knowing Scripture and appropriation, in popular terms head-knowledge and heart-knowledge, are worth noting, especially in an experiential context such as existed within a wing of the CGKN. The Reformed Confessions do not just sum up a number of facts or truths, they also explain the meaning or benefit of these facts or truths.⁶²⁷

2.14.2.10 GG: DE GIER 1989

Within the most conservative wing of the Dutch Reformed, little changed with respect to the position held on confessions and subscription. To illustrate this it suffices to turn to a commentary on CO-1619 written by Rev. K. de Gier, professor in church polity at the GGNA theological seminary in Rotterdam and minister in 's-Gravenhage-Centrum.

According to De Gier, those who want to change the confession are by default suspect of having departed from the ancient orthodox faith. Theoretically speaking, the confessions are subordinate to Scripture, but in practice they appear untouchable. Even the church order was considered untouchable; though De Gier could permit himself a comment on the absence of two of the Three Forms of Unity in CO-1619 art. 53, the GGN having never taken the step taken by other orthodox Reformed churches in The Netherlands of changing the Church Order on this point. De Gier's remarks on confessional renewal indicate how much respect there is in the most conservative wing of the Reformed churches for the confessions. This approach evidences traditionalism and comes very close to advocating literal subscription.⁶²⁸

2.14.2.11 GELOVEN IN ZEKERHEID? 2000

In 1999, the Theological University in Kampen (Broederweg) together with the *Gereformeerde Wetenschappelijk Genootschap* (Reformed Scientific Society) organized a congress on Reformed faith in postmodern times. One of the issues discussed was the certainty of faith and the confessions, for which the main address was given by Dr. B. Kamphuis, GKN(v) professor of dogmatics; two responses were given, the first by Rev. W. Dekker, NHK minister (*Gereformeerde Bond*) involved in the training of evangelists, and the second by Dr. S. Griffioen, member of the

⁶²⁶ Van der Dussen, "Functioneren".

⁶²⁷ Den Hertog, "Nood of Deugd?"

⁶²⁸ De Gier, *DKO*, 256-259.

GKN(v) and professor in social and historical philosophy at the Free University in Amsterdam. The papers presented at this congress were published in 2000 in a booklet with the appropriate title "Have Faith in Certainty?" Dr. B. Kamphuis gave his contribution the title "Certainty of Faith and Confessional Subscription." Rev. W. Dekker entitled his contribution "How Certain Are We Still?" The philosopher S. Griffioen spoke on "Closed and Open Forms of Contemporary Confessing."⁶²⁹

One matter that makes this debate so interesting is the fact that it dealt with the issue of confessing in an abstract manner. Thus this reflection was more of the sort that Da Costa had sought a century and a half earlier. Not surprisingly, themes that were in discussion in the mid-nineteenth century reappeared.

One such theme was the relationship between the objective and subjective sides to confessions, here presented as the dilemma of ontology and experience. All three debaters made clear that they considered the confessions to have an ontological substance, but noted that this substance cannot function (also not in binding) if the confession is not owned and its contents not experienced. In other words, the objective side to a confession cannot function if the subjective side is not considered.

Another theme was that of epistemology. In nineteenth century debates, this played a background role; in this last debate of the twentieth century, it was explicitly recognized for what it was. On this front, the three debaters diverged. Kamphuis suggested that confessions and related issues should not be viewed as foundational in an epistemological sense. He especially warned against trying to see the confessions as a closed and completed system of doctrine. Dekker remained very much within the framework of epistemology. Thus he advocated a return to 'believing on authority', and advocated the idea that one is free to join the confessing community (evidencing a societal view of the church). Griffioen suggested that there was both an epistemological and non-epistemological aspect to confessions. As to its essence, a confession is non-epistemological, but in the way it is used it takes on epistemological functions. The issues raised here are well worth further reflection.

Griffioen's emphasis on the outward movement of the confession also brought him to suggest that there can indeed be room for new confessing. Griffioen pointed to *Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony* of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, as an example of how such new confessing might be accomplished: simply issue an ecclesiastical statement on an issue and see how it is received in the church and the world. This suggests a middle road between the poles of 'confessions are born' and 'confessions are drawn up by theologians'. What Griffioen did not do, however, was explain how such a confession might function in the churches, the primary concern of this present study.⁶³⁰

2.14.2.12 CGKN: DEPUTIES EXTENT OF CONFSSIONAL BINDING

At GS Groningen 1989 of the CGKN, deputies Contact with Other Churches were instructed "to reflect on the question how much room there may and can be for divergence in a church holding a reformed confession." This mandate was given with a view to dialogue with the various other orthodox reformed associations of churches in The Netherlands. At GS Apeldoorn-Centrum 1992, deputies reported that they had not yet been able to accomplish their task, and their mandate was continued.

At GS Zierikzee 1995, deputies reported on the matter. They noted that there were two ways of answering the question. The easy answer was: there must be agreement in all that agrees with Scripture and confession, and in all other matters there is freedom. Deputies noted, however, that

⁶²⁹ Kamphuis, "Geloofszekerheid en Binding". Dekker, "Hoe Zeker?" Griffioen, "Eigentijds Belijden".

⁶³⁰ http://www.crcna.org/pages/our_world_main.cfm. It is interesting to note that *Our World Belongs to God* can be purchased in three versions: the text of the testimony, a study version of the testimony, and a liturgical version.

this did not really work in practice. There are also matters beyond Scripture and confession, such as those of church polity, on which there must be some measure of agreement. Furthermore, there is also divergence of view on how the confessions should be interpreted. Deputies admitted that the GKN(v) and NGK accused the CGKN of using double standards: while there was divergence within the CGKN, they were unwilling to grant the GKN(v) or NGK the same freedom. Deputies were unsure whether this was true, but felt that if it was true, internal unity must be given priority. Deputies admitted that their conclusions were primarily practical but felt they were of no less value than had they been principle. In closing, they noted that they considered their mandate too difficult, and requested synod to change their mandate.

Synod however was not satisfied with this report, nor did it consider it proven that the mandate was too difficult. It therefore continued the mandate.

At GS Haarlem-Noord 1998, deputies again requested that the mandate be reworded. In line with its request, the synod gave its deputies a two-part mandate. It had to reflect on the relationship between the local church and the association of churches in relations with churches belonging to other associations,⁶³¹ a matter that does not concern this study. The second mandate read:

Deputies are in the light of Holy Scripture to reflect on the question what weight may be given to matters such as own ecclesiastical culture, own ecclesiastical identity and the maintenance of internal ecclesiastical unity, and how the church of Christ, conscious of and under the claim of Christ's prayer for the unity of His own, and on the way to His future, is to deal therewith.

At GS Leeuwarden/Nunspeet 2001, deputies submitted the report regarding this second mandate. Deputies determined not to go about their mandate abstractly but to take their starting point in the existing situation, realizing that they might have to cut deeply into CGKN flesh. Deputies first tried to determine identifying marks of the CGKN and passed judgement, sometimes positive and sometimes negative, on these. They then turned to the norm by which practice should be standardized, noting: "The measure by which we must measure can be none other than that of Scripture and confession. The church does not belong to people but to the Lord." However, they continued, the Lord uses people in His church gathering work. Thus a church will always bear within it divine and human elements. The divine elements are normative, but there are also elements that are not normative, deputies explained, pointing to church polity as a field in which reformed churches have always displayed a large measure of tolerance. "The foundation on which unity may and must be sought can be none other than that which is the basis for 'our own' churches. The Forms of Unity are justifiably the basis for church federation." Deputies emphasized that only Scripture and confession could function as the basis for church unity, and thereby considered the question of synod answered. Deputies took note of GKN(v) criticism that CGKN synods constantly obstructed unity talks out of fear for causing dissent within the CGKN, while the divergence within the CGKN⁶³² was as great if not greater than the difference between the CGKN and the GKN(v).

Synod considered the picture painted of the CGKN to be somewhat too negative but, with minor corrections, adopted the report of deputies and had it forwarded to the local churches as a guideline in local discussions. Synod even added a mandate to local CGKNs to look at internal relations with other CGKNs.⁶³³

⁶³¹ At this stage there were so-called 'combi-congregations': congregations with NGK and CGKN members and thus belonging to both associations.

⁶³² This divergence is such that some local churches are unwilling to open their pulpits to all ministers of other CGKNs and confessional membership of a CGKN does not necessarily imply admission to the Lord's Supper in every CGKN.

⁶³³ *Acta...CGKN...* 1989, art. 170; *Acta...CGKN...* 1992, art. 108; *Acta...CGKN...* 1995, art. 168 and appendix 14; *Acta...CGKN...* 1998, art. 286 (mandate found in report to GS 2001); *Acta...CGKN...* 2001, art. 166 and appendix 21.

Thus the CGKN concluded that only Scripture and confession could serve to distinguish churches from each other, where ‘confessions’ are understood to include all necessary doctrines. This position has implications for the function of confessional writings—they serve to distinguish—and for their substance—they may not include more than what is ‘necessary’. Deputies did not delve into whether the concrete confessions of the CGKN actually met these requirements; it seems they simply assumed they did so.

2.14.2.13 GKN(v)—NEW CONFESSING?

In 2004, fourteen church leaders from across the world, having followed a course at the *Intercultural Reformed Theological Training*, a training centre run by the GKN(v), together wrote the *Candlestand Statement: Reformed Considerations Concerning the Charismatic Movement*. It has been published in both English and Dutch. Although not officially adopted by any church, it does read like a confessional document, much along the lines of the Canons of Dort.⁶³⁴

A hot issue in the GKN(v) during the late 1990s and early 2000s was the relationship between the fourth commandment and the Sunday. GS Amersfoort-Centrum 2005 of the GKN(v) adopted a position paper on the matter known as a *Handreiking* (Resource). It was specifically noted that this document did not carry confessional authority. Its status was considered to be most like the doctrinal sections in the liturgical forms. The second part of this position paper, consisting of twenty thesis statements, was adopted with a view to catechesis in the churches.⁶³⁵

While neither of these documents are confessional documents in the church political sense, it cannot be denied that both documents to an extent fulfil functions that are generally considered to be within the domain of confessional documents. The *Candlestand Statement* is a testimony to the world of the faith of the churches, and the *Handreiking* effectively functions as an appendix to HC LD 38. It will not be surprising if these documents function in the future much like the *Contemporary Testimony* of the Christian Reformed Churches in North America (2.14.2.11).

2.14.3 ANALYSIS

This last historical chapter has reviewed typical positions of prominent persons or churches in the Calvinist camp. It is clear from the foregoing that even within this camp there were different stances, to the extent of even being church-schismatic. In what follows, a brief topical analysis of the various positions will be given.

To begin with, when reading publications on confessional subscription one must learn to read between the lines. An allegation that someone is ‘confessionalist’ or ‘anti-confessionalist’ (‘biblicist’) can only be properly understood if one knows the position of the person making the allegation. Within the Calvinist camp there is quite a spectrum of positions, and an author will always consider himself in the centre, and thus consider others to the right or left. A typical example of this is the discussion between De Jong, Van Ommen, and Velema. In the heat of discussion, the application of a label is not so much determined by the arguments themselves but by the connotations that an author wishes to convey with his labelling. This certainly did not help make the discussion clear.

The interdenominational debate in particular on certainty and faith makes it manifest that epistemology plays an important role in how one views confessions and subscription. Kamphuis repeatedly pointed out that confessions are incomplete or fragmentary articulations of the truth. Dekker saw a Liberal and Ethical emphasis in this. He felt the confessions articulated the full, necessary truth. He admitted that this full truth might not be comprehended by all, and argued that one must believe (accept the confession) on authority of the speaker. This clearly tends towards an

The report was published as: Deputaten voor de eenheid van gereformeerde belijdenis in Nederland van de CGKN, *Zoeken naar Kerkelijke Eenheid*.

⁶³⁴ www.candlestand.nl. Translations into various other languages are in the make.

⁶³⁵ *Acta...GKN(v)...* 2005, art. 22. An English translation of the *Handreiking* can be found via www.gkv.nl.

implicit faith. While both Kamphuis and Dekker take a more intellectualist approach to the confessions, the former is less convinced of its completeness than the latter. Hence Kamphuis considered confessions more an endpoint (doxology), while Dekker considered them a starting point (standard for faith). It is arguable, however, that Dekker did not really challenge the point that Kamphuis was making. Kamphuis did not argue that our knowing is *uncertain*, as Liberals and Ethicals had, but that our knowing (and thus confessing) is *incomplete*. Kamphuis' remarks are rather to be contrasted with, for example, Kuyper's view of confessions as advocated by the GKN prior to World War II. Kuyper's view was that confessions were the most perfect summation of divine doctrines for a particular moment, and formed a systematic whole.

Another element that was determinative for a position was ecclesiology. With respect to confessional subscription, the relationship between the local church and an association of churches played an important role in discussions between GKN(v) and NGK. The GKN(v) considered the confession an accord for fellowship, and therefore local congregations were bound by the common church order to the confessions. In the NGK, the bond with the confession was not as strict: although the churches together bound to confessions, local churches were free to go their own way. In a very restricted sense, the NGK mirrored the NHK on this point.

Two discussions make clear how contractarian elements also play a role in confessional subscription. Wiskerke considered substantive criticism of the confessions perjury and a breach of contract. On the other hand, Griffioen argued that the legislative elements in the form of subscription were improper: subscription should be no more than an emphatic profession of faith. This raises the question how the two elements being bound into a confession—profession of faith and juridical aspects—should be combined. Is contractarian use of the confessions, as accord for fellowship or foundation for communion, legitimate? Must one personally profess the faith of ecclesiastical confessions?

To this may be added the question, to what extent does such binding apply in the church? During the 1960s, those who later were excluded from the GKN(v) advocated graduated binding to confessions: the ecumenical creeds for 'ordinary' church members, and the Reformation Confessions in addition for office bearers in the church. The GKN(v) advocated a gradual binding, where all must strive to understand everything the confessions teach, including the Canons of Dort.

The debates of the last four decades of the twentieth century often focussed on particular dilemmas. Initially, the GKN(v) tended to emphasize the objective side of the confessions—confessions are statements of truths—while the NGK tended to emphasize the subjective side—confessions are statements of faith. Closely related is the emphasis early on in the debate on intellectual appropriation of the confessions (e.g. H. J. Schilder) or experiential appropriation of the confessions (e.g. C. Vonk). Den Hertog argued that the dilemma is false; both are important. It is interesting to note that Kamphuis also argued this 1999. Another dilemma concerned that of ontology and functionality, as Graafland explained the shift from the noun 'confession' to the verb 'to confess'. On this point, Calvinists were seen to seek the synthesis rather than being forced to choose between the two. In the debates of "*Geloven in Zekerheid?*" a similar dilemma was encountered: that of ontology and experience. Here too, the synthesis was sought rather than a choice for one at expense to the other. Finally, there is the dilemma of juridical or medical enforcement of subscription. The GKN(v) clearly advocated a juridical approach, and the NGK a medical approach. It does not appear from a review of the debates that a synthesis was sought on this issue.

Another dividing issue was the precise definition of the substance of the confession, the 'substance-misery' as Wiskerke referred to it. All publicists advocated Groen's concept of a 'broad-minded and unambiguous binding'. The problem, however, was in determining what belonged to the substance of a confession and what did not. The GKN(v) saw more substance to the substance of the confession than did the NGK. With respect to both, however, it was noted that the distinction between substantive and not-substantive is always arbitrarily drawn by

individuals. Formally, the positions of the GKN(v) and NGK do not differ. In its 2001 report, the CGKN implied that the confessions as a whole are necessary, bringing it more or less in line with the GKN(v). That the GKN(v) and CGKN see eye to eye on this point, and distinguish themselves from the NGK over this issue, is also clear from unification talks within the *Kleine Oecumene*.

Another element that was debated on several occasions was the relevance of a confession. Van Genderen considered the confessions somewhat time-abstracted articulations of eternal truths, and as such relevant in all times. De Boer warned that one should not be influenced by an evolutionary view of history, as if what is of later date is always better than what went before. Van der Dussen pointed out that confessions are not always applicable in every period; his catechism students didn't discuss trans-substantiation on the bus to school. Van der Dussen used the expression 'time-bound', which made his story suspect, if one hearkens to Den Hertog. Den Hertog argued that confessions are 'time-related' and 'time-involved': their truth-value lasts, but might not be as applicable in one period as in another. This is also what Van der Dussen was trying to say. Moreover, De Boer and Van Genderen would not have disagreed with what Den Hertog pointed out. Stating that elements in confessions are time-related does not imply rejection of the truth of what is confessed, as for example the Liberals in the NHK or GKN[s] argued.

The matter of confessional relevance raises the issues of changing confessions. Such change may take place by reducing the confession: may one remove something from the confession because it is no longer relevant? De Gier argued that anyone wishing to change (let alone reduce) confessions makes himself suspect of deviating from the one truth. This argument is surely improper since it argues on the basis of fiction not reality. However, the question of whether a confession may be reduced is not really discussed in the publications reviewed.

One can also change confessions by perfecting them. De Jong argued that new exegetical findings might challenge the way in which certain Scripture passages are used in confessions. Should one not bring the confessions in line with these findings? The GKN(v) did so in 1984 when they removed the Johannine comma from the Belgic Confession as proof-text for the Trinity. This element too, has not been fully debated.

One can also change a confession, or rather, the confessions, by adopting a new one. Van der Dussen claimed that the churches should choose this path (though the NGK have never done so). Griffioen pointed to the *Contemporary Witness* of the CRCNA as a good example. However, the *Contemporary Witness* is formally no different from the *Fundamenten en Perspectieven van Belijden* of the NHK or the *Proeve van een Geloofsgetuigenis* of the GKN[s]. It does not have proper confessional status. The legislative or prescriptive element of confessional writings in fact disappears from view.

The question is additionally whether such a confession would 'take'. Graafland and Kamphuis emphasized that confessions are born, not made. They in fact denied the possibility, at least in the present, of a new confession. On the other hand, where the NHK and GKN[s] failed, the CRCNA with its *Contemporary Witness* succeeded. Griffioen considered it a prime example of how it might work. However, the problem here is that such a witness has no church orderly status, and one cannot speak of confessional subscription. Thus here too there is an open end: how might a new confession (a testimony or witness) function fully in a church?

2.14.4 CONCLUSION

Compared with the discussions of the nineteenth century, the debates of the last four decades of the twentieth century were detailed. As those within the Calvinist Camp crystallized their position on a particular matter, the implications of this stance were worked out, and led to new debates. These new debates were as momentous and heated as those of the nineteenth century, even leading to ecclesiastical division. The debate is thus far from over. In fact, a stance on confessions and confessional subscription functions itself at times as a necessary or fundamental article of confessing.

Historical Part

The debates are far from over. In spite of two hundred years of a call for a new confession, there still is none. The confessing of Calvinist churches in The Netherlands remains limited to the Ecumenical Creeds and the Three Forms of Unity. The debate on confessional subscription continues to rage. Unification talks between CKGN, NGK and GKN(v) and continued discussions in the circles of the *Contact Orgaan voor de Gereformeerde Gezindte* will ensure that the debate will not disappear from the ecclesiastical agenda.

3. Systematic Part

It is one thing to describe the history of a debate on a ‘hot’ issue. The historian is asked to relay the facts and interpret them historically. It is quite another to write systematically on the same issue. One is no longer the historian, but participator in the debate. However, it would be unwise to embark on a systematic study without historical background. On the other side of the coin, history has a lesson to teach, and the lesson learned should be articulated. Having completed an adequate historical survey of confessions and subscription to them in the Dutch Reformed context, this study now turns to a systematic study of the same material.

This systematic survey has three purposes: to systematize the factors involved in confessions and confessional subscription; to evaluate elements of the debates within Dutch Reformed circles particularly in the period after 1816; and to form a personal opinion on the issue. To make clear how this present writer sees things in practice, some church political texts will be developed during the course of reflection.⁶³⁶

The systematic evaluation consists of four chapters and a conclusion.

In the first (3.1), issues will be reviewed that seem remote from the matter of confessions and confessional subscription but—given the historical survey—have made their mark on the debates. Premises from the fields of systematic theology, philosophy, anthropology/psychology, and law will be considered.

In the chapter that follows (3.2), the concepts ‘faith’ and ‘doctrine’, and how they function in the church, will be addressed, since the historical survey makes clear that choices are made with respect to these issues that have repercussions for one’s understanding of confessions and one’s position with respect to confessional subscription.

Having determined positions with respect to underlying premises and given a personal understanding of the concepts ‘faith’ and ‘doctrine’, the matter of confessing and confessional documents can be addressed (3.3). What is confessing? how does it function? why commit one’s confessing to writing? what is the authority of confessions?—these and similar questions will receive attention in this chapter.

In the last chapter of the systematic part (3.4), the issue of subscribing confessions will be addressed. Questions such as the propriety of binding, the subject of binding, the extent of binding, and procedures in subscription such as the ‘who, what, where and when’ of subscription, as well as the maintenance of subscription will receive attention.

⁶³⁶ These texts have been collated in Appendix III.

3.1 Framework

The historical survey makes amply clear that reflecting on confessions and subscription is not an isolated matter but stands firmly in the context of church life. Positions on confessional subscription are argued along various lines of logic proceeding from a large variety of premises. Very basic choices can already determine the outcome. For example, the Groninger position on epistemology, the Modernist position on Scripture, and the Ethical position on ecclesiology have proven to be determinative for the stance taken on confessions and subscription to them. In reflecting on the material, my own view is that many publications on confessions and subscription are ‘too quick’ and thus superficial. The full implications of starting points are often not taken into account when conclusions are drawn. Did Groningers (and their opponents) realize that their position on confessions was anchored in their Kantian epistemology? Did Ethicals (and their opponents) realize that their position on confessions was determined by their ecclesiology? Did Calvinists realize that appealing to contractarian notions meant tying the confessions to the floating dock of the majority of church members instead of anchoring it in the rockbed of Scripture? Did the GKN(v) realize that a rationalist perfectionist stance on confessional documents can lead to confessionalism?

The historical survey further makes clear that conclusions drawn are often not fully supported by the evidence adduced or the line of argument utilized. Thus Groningers and Barthians are eclectic in their approach to and use of Scripture. Thus, too, the phrase coined by Groen van Prinsterer to protect the position of confessions—*onbekrompen en ondubbelzinnig*—has come to lead a life of its own so that it is ambiguous today, to say the least. These remarks at this stage are not made as value judgements: they are observations. In what follows I hope to substantiate what I here claim.

The reason why this is pointed out at this stage is to make clear why the systematic study begins with an exposition on issues that at first glance seem to be far removed from the focus of this present study. The fact is, to get to the bottom of the issue of confessions and subscription to them, one needs to start with the foundations and not just look at the structure of the building. Looking at the foundations or the underlying premises is what this chapter intends to do.

There are two sorts of premises that I feel comfortable dealing with: dogmatic premises and philosophical premises, since these are fields of study I have busied myself with in the past. During the course of my research, I have also become convinced that there are anthropological elements in play. This being a field of study I have not been engaged in, I will do no more than indicate where I believe further study might be of benefit to the issue of confessions and subscription. Finally, this being a church political study, it is imperative to look also at the field of law. Again, because this is a field in which I am not specialized, I will do no more than raise some questions that require further study.

In this chapter an overview will be presented of premises in the fields of dogmatics (3.1.1) and philosophy (3.1.2) that relate to or exert an influence on the matter of confessions and confessional subscription. Of course, I will not set out to write a full dogmatics or develop an own philosophy. In both sections those matters will be described that have proven relevant. I will also describe and defend my own position on the various matters that are reviewed with a view to developing an personal position on confessions and subscription to them. I have further inserted brief sections on anthropological considerations (3.1.3) and juridical aspects (3.1.4). I reiterate that these sections merely intend to raise a number of questions that would require expert consideration in relation to confessions and subscription.

3.1.1 DOGMATIC ASPECTS

Why were Modernists opposed to the Reformed confessions but not to confessions as such? Why did Groningers consider confessions detrimental to God’s plan with man? Why did confessional subscription become a farce in the NHK? Why are many orthodox Calvinists not impressed by the formation of the PKN? The answers are not to be found in positions with respect to confessions as

such but in the broader spectrum of dogmatic choices made. In this section I will review the more prominent loci that directly relate to the matter of confessing and confessional subscription as evident from the historical survey. These are the doctrine of revelation, since it is the source and norm for confessing (3.1.1.1); the doctrine of man (both in his natural and saved state), since he is the one confessing (3.1.1.2); and the doctrine of the church, since confessions and subscription function in this sphere (3.1.1.3).

In writing this chapter, I have made much use of the dogmatics written by the CGKN professors Van Genderen and Velema. This dogmatics is considered to be the up-to-date representation of orthodox Calvinism in The Netherlands. I have been somewhat broad in describing the loci under discussion because this up-to-date material is at the time of writing not readily available in the English language.⁶³⁷ Use has also been made of a key publication of the GKN(v) Dr. J. Douma on foundations for ethics, in which he explores how Christians may determine how they should live.⁶³⁸

3.1.1.1 DOCTRINE OF REVELATION

The Reformed consider divine revelation to be the norm for all human structures and activity. Thus in the Reformed tradition the doctrine of revelation is crucial to the issue of confessions. Confessions derive their substance from divine revelation and in their functioning are standardized by Scripture. Time and again, the echo is heard in debates on the authority of confessions that Scripture is the standard that standardizes the confessions: Scripture is the *norma normans*, the confession is the *norma normata*.

Especially since the rise of modern theology, one of the difficulties here encountered is the distinction between ‘revelation’ and ‘religion’. ‘Revelation’ has been defined as God turning to man and ‘religion’ as man turning to God.⁶³⁹ Within a reformed context, revelation is paralleled by Scripture (as God’s Word for human-kind) and religion is paralleled by confessions (as man’s response to God).

*Where the lines between revelation and religion are blurred the distinction between Scripture and confessional documents also blurs. When the line blurs, it generally means that Scripture is demoted to the level of confessions as human writings (e.g. S. Meijers, 2.13.1.2). Scripture is then considered to be no more than a (human) confessional writing. Occasionally confessions have been elevated to (almost) the level of Scripture as divine writing (e.g. G. de Hoest *cum suis* 2.6.2.7). I believe, here too, there is a matter of blurring revelation and religion: religion becomes revelation.*

Because confessions find their source in revelation, the goal of revelation impacts on the existence of confessions. This will have my attention first (3.1.1.1.1). Echoing revelation implies being able to know, hear, and understand revelation. On this score, too, there are various positions (3.1.1.1.2). There is also disagreement on what might be considered the locale of revelation, the place where revelation is found (3.1.1.1.3). Further, orthodox Calvinism sees special revelation as recorded in Scripture as the source for true faith and required confessing. There is, however, disagreement on the characteristics of special revelation that impinge on the confessional activity of the church. These characteristics will thus also be reviewed (3.1.1.1.4). Having surveyed the field in portions, I will then illustrate on the basis of historical materials how dogmatic stances with respect to revelation have played a role in positions on confessions and subscription to them (3.1.1.1.5).

⁶³⁷ Van Genderen and Velema, *BGD*. The dogmatics of Van Genderen and Velema stands especially in the tradition of H. Bavinck, in which tradition the English dogmatics of L. Berkhof also stands. An English translation of *BGD* is at the moment being undertaken; a Hungarian translation already exists.

⁶³⁸ Douma, *Grondslagen*. Portions of this book can be found in the appendices published in Douma, *Ten Commandments*.

⁶³⁹ Van Genderen and Velema, *BGD*, 52.

3.1.1.1.1 Goal of Revelation

Ecclesiastical confessing might be considered formally a response to divine revelation and substantively a systematized presentation of what is revealed, motivated and formed by the ecclesiastical context in which it originated. As a response to divine revelation, the questions arise whether and to what extent confessing is fulfilment of the purpose of revelation. As a systematized presentation of the substance of revelation, confessions are often pressed into the role of revelation (think, for example, of catechetical instruction). Whatever one may think of these processes⁶⁴⁰—I have here described an existing practice—it is evident that the goal of revelation plays an important role in questions concerning the functioning of confessions.

Revelation is called ‘divine’, not only because it originates with God but also because it is about God. One may thus say that revelation has as its purpose the revelation of God. In revelation He makes Himself known. In Scripture this is often referred to as the making known of God’s Name. Here ‘knowing’—in Hebrew *יָדָע*—is not merely ‘being acquainted with’ but has the deeper meaning of ‘standing in relation to’.⁶⁴¹ God makes known His Name so that humans might know Him in order to glorify Him, which we do by imaging Him.

In the process of making known God’s Name, revelation has various other purposes. Revelation aims to make clear what the will of God is for our lives (2 Tim. 3:16-17), to make known to us who the Christ is (John 5:39, 20:30-31), and to point out to us the way of salvation (Rom. 15:4). All this is also intended to aid man in imaging God, in praising the Creator (cf. Col. 3:10 and Eph. 4:21-24). Faith is the vehicle by which this imaging and praising gains form.

One might say that the secondary goal of revelation is to make mankind aware of reality, of the things that are and the way in which they are connected. It gives an answer to the questions of life: who we are, why we exist, where we came from, where we are going. Luther is said to have written, “Revelation is not just the making known of truths about God, people and the world. In his revelation God addresses man in order to enlighten him with respect to his real situation.”⁶⁴² In short: revelation seeks to impart knowledge to man so that man might stand in relation to and image God.

Because man’s confessing has its substantive origin in divine revelation, such confessing is evidence of the extent to which revelation has achieved its goal. Man’s confessing will reflect the substance of revelation which man has made his own. Further, where man’s confessing is used for instruction in divine truth, such confessing is obviously to mirror divine revelation substantively. In light of both these observations and the goal of revelation, it is appropriate for confessional documents to contain statements of both a doctrinal-ontological character and an ethical-functional character.

The NHK synod valued the Heidelberg Catechism for its ethical focus (2.4.4). However, confessions are to be valued for the full breadth of their substance.

It is noteworthy that the Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dort tend to be very much dogmatic while the Heidelberg Catechism has a mix of dogmatics and ethics. The Westminster Confession also contains articles on ethical issues.

In closing, I understand the primary goal of divine revelation to be to make God known so that man might stand in relation to and image God. Secondary goals include prescriptions for man’s understanding of reality and walk of life. All this has as its ultimate goal to have man image God. Hence divine revelation requires acknowledgement by man and appropriation of its substance through implementation in life. Human confessing as articulation and expression of faith is part of this acknowledgement.

⁶⁴⁰ See 3.3.4.1.2 for a discussion on confessing as response to and repetition of revelation.

⁶⁴¹ BDB, 393ff; WvB, 312-316.

⁶⁴² Van Genderen and Velema, *BGD*, 40.

3.1.1.1.2 Man's Ability to Receive Divine Revelation

Confessing is the expression of convictions. These convictions have their origin in divine revelation. However there have often been those who have questioned man's ability to receive and know divine revelation. Inability to receive divine revelation, or to know for certain that one has received divine revelation, impairs one's ability to confess on the basis of Scripture. Thus those convinced that man is not able to understand—whether fully or in part—divine revelation, have considered the confessional endeavour, as traditionally understood, impossible.

I point out that at this stage I wish to look at man's ability to receive divine revelation from a theological perspective. At a later stage I will look at the same issue from an epistemological perspective (3.1.2.2). The two, of course, are very closely related, and thus a measure of overlap is unavoidable. To an extent, the matter is also determined by the doctrine of man, which will receive attention in 3.1.1.2.

3.1.1.1.2.1 God Revealed

Revelation is a sovereign act of God. It bears a personal character: it is given in divine love and is received in faith. It ought therefore not to be abstracted or reduced to a communication of individual truths. The personal, emotive aspect does not mean, however, that there is no intellectual or cognitive element in revelation. Divine revelation contains instructions for our heads, hearts, and hands, for our thinking, feeling, and actions (cf. Mark 12:30). Given the goal of revelation (3.1.1.1), given the fact that revelation has its source with God, and given the fact that God created man, it is logical to hold that man should be able to receive divine revelation. The testimony of Scripture is also that man is able to receive divine revelation (Rom. 1:19; John 14:7).

Kant considered knowledge of a Ding-an-sich impossible. In his system of thought, revelation, while possible, can never achieve its goal. As a result, man is limited in his considerations of divine matters to his own thoughts. From a rational point of view, all revelation, since it had to pass through the filter of man, is religion. Standardizing a confession by revelation logically became identical to tying up a ship to another ship instead of the wharf. The influence of Kant's epistemology is especially evident in Groninger theology and Modernism.

Schleiermacher replaced reason with emotional experience (Gefühl). In this system of thought the role of both revelation and religion changes, and as a consequence also the roles which Scripture and confessions have. Schleiermacher's ideas have been influential in later Groninger thought and Ethical thought.

3.1.1.1.2.2 Immanence and Transcendence.

The ability to know divine revelation is often expressed as a tension between God's immanence and transcendence. Some emphasize the fact that God is in our midst, and thus can be fully known. Others emphasize that God is totally different and thus cannot be known at all. The former position suggests that confessing divine truth in its entirety would be possible (the position inclined towards by Traditionalists). The latter suggests that confessing is impossible, always guesswork (as held by Ethicals, Barthians, and many postmodern Christians).

However, immanence and transcendence should not be played out against each other. Rather, they form a kind of scale. At the one end, God's Word is not beyond man's knowing (Deut. 29:29; Rom. 1:18). At the other end, man's knowledge is imperfect and incomplete (Deut. 29:29; 1John 3:2). The point is, though: what man *needs* to know has been revealed to man and can be sufficiently known (2 Tim. 3:14-16; 1 John 2:20). It would be a strange world if man should not have the ability to comprehend whatever is necessary for him to know in order to fulfil his purpose as God's creation: to image God!

In short, I hold that God's immanence does not imply that we know everything and God's transcendence does not imply that we know nothing. We have a partial knowledge, consisting of all that which is useful and necessary (cf. BC art. 2). This knowledge is dependent on the extent to which we believe that which God reveals to and promises us.

It is this partial knowledge that forms the substance of man's confessing. The implications of this will be further looked at in 3.2.5.

*Groningers and Ethicals emphasized the transcendent element in revelation. As a result they were very cautious in positing that something is knowledge of God. Though they considered confessing necessary as articulation of one's faith (as evidence of *fides qua*), they considered written confessions a daring endeavour, and hence rejected confessional subscription.*

This line of reasoning continued with Barth, with this difference, that for Barth the moment of revelation and the moment of confessing fall together. In Barth's system, written confessions are no more than photographs of a moment of confessing.

Modernists and Conservatives tend to emphasize the immanence of divine revelation. There is among them a tendency to equate confessing in substance with revelation, and therefore they consider confessional subscription appropriate. However, the two differ in that Modernists take a subjective approach to revelation, considering revelation to be man's religious sentiment. Conservatives take an objective approach to revelation, where revelation is God's communication to man and therefore stands above all criticism.

*A text that is often encountered in this discussion is 1 Corinthians 13:9. However, it is debatable whether the *γνῶσις* to which Paul here is referring is a type of knowing that is common to all people. Knowledge could here refer to an understanding that is directly revealed by God to a person. One might say that 'prophecy' is then the ability to speak a message and 'knowledge' is the ability to understand a matter. Within a cessationist framework this type of knowledge has ceased, just as prophesying has.⁶⁴³*

3.1.1.1.2.3 Conclusion

Revelation is God's personal communication with man, in which He directs Himself to man as a whole. Although God is entirely different from man, He communicates with man in such a way that man should be able to understand Him and come to know that which he should know. On the one hand, man does not know everything. On the other hand, man does know something.

Therefore I hold that man is able to receive divine revelation in order to echo it in his confessing.

3.1.1.1.3 The Locale of Revelation

Ecclesiastical confessing is a presentation of the substance of revelation. This means that the locale of revelation must be identified. Where is revelation to be found so that it may function as a source for confessing? Traditionally, the Reformed locate the locale of revelation in creation and Scripture (BC art. 2). In this process there is a hierarchy: without Scripture creation cannot be properly understood. Modernists, however, felt that creation (including man's rationality) is an independent locale of divine revelation. Because they tended to consider Scripture as no more than the articulation of human faith experiences, Scripture plays a less important role when it comes to locating divine revelation. Scripture is, for them, often no more than an equivalent for modern faith experiences.

I will first review a common Reformed distinction within revelation—general revelation and special revelation—to understand the relationship between these two and its impact on confessing (3.1.1.1.3.1.). Next the precise relationship between special revelation and Scripture will be reviewed, since confessing bases itself traditionally on Scripture (3.1.1.1.3.2). Finally, two aspects of the doctrine of Scripture will receive attention: the inspiration of Scripture (3.1.1.1.3.3) and the closed character of the canon (3.1.1.1.3.4).

3.1.1.1.3.1 General and Special Revelation.

Reformed theology distinguishes between general and special revelation. General revelation is defined as that which God communicates in general (cf. Rom. 1:20). Special revelation is defined as that which God communicates to a specific person or group of persons in a specific situation (cf. Psalm 147:19-20). At this point it is sufficient to point to creation as a form of general revelation and Scripture as a form of special revelation (cf. BC art. 2). Both creation and Scripture are revelatory (Psalm 19:1-2 and 2 Tim. 3:16-17 respectively).

⁶⁴³ See Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 644 and Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 1045. With thanks to J. W. Maris for pointing this out to me.

Defending the existence of general revelation does not however mean justifying the existence of a natural theology. General revelation can lead to confessing (e.g. Psalm 8:2,10), but one requires the knowledge of special revelation to do so properly (Rom. 1:18-32), for mankind, in his fallen, sinful state, is inclined to all evil and has no interest in God (Jer. 17:9; Prov. 22:15a). General revelation has no effect, for man shuts it out. One might say, to make good use of general revelation one needs the glasses of Scripture and the eyes of faith.

It is through special revelation that God overcomes man's blindness and deafness. The Triune God reveals Himself and makes known how man might be saved and restored to his original position and task of imaging God. God has chosen to make this message known over the course of time, implying that later revelation always deepens and fills out earlier revelation. In short, one might say that special revelation is theocentric, trinitarian, soteriological, and progressive in character.

Special revelation is thus determinative for understanding general revelation. General revelation can be used to give form to human activities, as long as what is understood to be revealed generally does not contradict special revelation.⁶⁴⁴

*In debating confessional subscription, use has been made of what I have designated a 'spiritual' line of argument and a 'natural' line of argument. The 'spiritual' line bases itself on special revelation, the 'natural' line on general revelation. Examples of these two lines are found in the writings of [Borneman] (2.5.2.3), De Cock (2.5.2.4), the Seven Gentlemen (2.6.2.3), and especially De Hoest *cum suis* (2.6.2.7). With the publication of Groen's *Het Regt* (2.7.2.2) the 'natural' line of argumentation disappeared, possibly because Da Costa had convinced Groen van Prinsterer that such arguments could not hold in the sphere of the church. During the late 1840s, the 'natural' line of argument was also not used by Van Velzen (2.8.2.12). The problem with the 'natural' line of argument is not the method itself, for general revelation does say something. The problem is that it made use of contractarian notions, which, as I will argue later on, cannot be applied directly to the church since they are not fully in keeping with special revelation (cf. 3.1.1.3.3.1).*

3.1.1.1.3.2 Special Revelation and Scripture

Special revelation is the direct communication and association of God with people in which there lies a clear message. God has committed part of this special revelation to writing so that coming generations might be instructed thereby. Scripture itself is not the whole of divine special revelation. However, all of Scripture is divine special revelation.

Modernists consider Scripture to be the record of human experiences of the divine which functions as the source for the Christian religion (e.g. J. H. Scholten (2.7.2.6)). Scripture is thus itself a confession that has survived the ages. It is, speaking in terms of categories, an articulation of experiences with divine revelation. This approach does not distinguish special and general revelation in the traditional Calvinist sense. As a consequence, the role of general revelation becomes more prevalent, evident in the fact that the substance of Modernist theology is strongly dependent on science.

Ethicals understood Scripture merely to be the charter for the revelation of salvation. This undermines the historical character of the Scriptures. Undermining the historical character in turn leads to re-interpretation of the message of Scripture. The standard for interpretation is then no longer Scripture itself but the reader. If taken to its logical end—as the Young Ethicals did—one ends up far removed from traditional Reformed teachings. In this context, Scripture is not up to the task of being the source for confessing.

Closely related to the Ethical position is the Barthian position that Scripture is a testimony to revelation. The term 'testimony' indicates that Scripture is in fact considered to be no more than a confession. It undermines the normative character of Scripture and presents no other standard by which one might come to know what true revelation of God is. In this context, the distinction between Scripture and confessing blurs.

Special revelation is thus broader, more encompassing, than that which is found in Scripture. However, it is God Himself who had the Scriptures compiled. Given God's faithfulness, one may

⁶⁴⁴ Thus Douma writes that the Spirit not only grants knowledge through the Word but also with (beside) the Word. Knowledge gained with (beside) the Word may never contradict knowledge gained through the Word. (Douma, *Grondslagen*, 117-119.)

then say that in them is contained all man needs to know in order to glorify God and to be saved (BC art. 2). One might thus describe Scripture as God's testimony to Himself so that mankind might be His image.

Groningers, Ethicals, and Barthians acknowledge that God's Word contains revelation or reflects revelation but cannot point out what is revelatory. Such vagueness regarding revelation translates into vagueness with respect to the substance of confessing. Vagueness surrounding the substance of confessing makes one hesitant to bind to confessions. Hence the Middenorthodoxie was not keen on confessional subscription.

There is also a current of thought that claims that human experience brings divine revelation into being. Examples are Schleiermacher (experience is the source of revelation) and Berkhof (only when man acknowledges revelation can one speak of divine revelation). Because the experience of man is diverse, the clarity of revelation is affected, and as a result also the clarity of confessing. Again, this will fuel resistance to confessional binding.

3.1.1.1.3.3 Scripture as Breathed by God

The fact that Scripture has been breathed by God (2 Tim. 3:16) implies that the whole of Scripture comes from God. The Dutch Reformed traditionally hold to a view of inspiration which argues that the Spirit has made use of people in their own situation and with their own gifts. Over time, this has become known as organic inspiration. The so-called organic character of inspiration, however, does not detract from the divine character of Scripture.⁶⁴⁵

Rationalists argue that only a part of the Bible is inspired, namely that part which is religious or ethical. This leads to arbitrariness, for there is no standard by which to decide what is religious or ethical.

Ethicals argue that those who wrote Scripture were driven or motivated by the Spirit (inspired in the modern sense of the term). This stance, indicated by the term 'dynamic inspiration', implies that people today can be likewise inspired or motivated. One of the consequences of this view is that the distinction between Scripture and confessions becomes vague.

Barth cum suis hold to actualist inspiration. A word of Scripture is only then divinely inspired when God wants it to be inspired. This too, leads to arbitrariness, for there is no standard by which to measure whether something is inspired or not.

With respect to confessions and confessional subscription, these stances imply that there is no fixed or clear-cut standard on which to draw. If the substance of Scripture is uncertain, the substance of its derivative (a confessional statement) will likewise be uncertain and binding to that derivative will be out of the question.

3.1.1.1.3.4 The Closed Character of the Canon of Scripture

With the first coming of Christ, divine revelation reached its climax (Heb. 1:1). The first generation of Christ's followers committed His words and deeds to writing (Mark 1:1; Luke 1:1-4; John 20:31; 21:24-25; Acts 1:1-2; Rev. 1:1; cf. Gal. 1:8-9). Hence the canon of Scripture is closed and nothing can be added to it. "The canon is a given. There is nothing in it which should have been excluded and it lacks nothing which should have belonged to it."⁶⁴⁶ It should be further noted that the ground for acknowledging the canon does not so much lie in the testimony of the Holy Spirit in our hearts as in the trustworthiness of Scripture. Scripture proves itself, it is *axiopistic*.

The closed character of the canon implies that special revelation required for all of mankind has come to an end. Since the close of the canon, all general revelation must be understood in the light of the special revelation presented in Scripture. Thus Scripture is the complete and only standard for all of life, including confessions.

⁶⁴⁵ Claims that the Dutch Reformed traditionally hold to a mechanical view of inspiration have never been proven (Van Genderen and Velema, *BGD*, 85). See also Trimp, "Hoe staan wij ervoor?", 117-124. Trimp argues that the term 'inspiration' is inadequate. The characterization 'organic'—it originates with H. Bavinck (Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* 1:456)—is becoming less common. See also Maris, *Geloof en Schriftgezag*, 25-29.

⁶⁴⁶ Van Genderen and Velema, *BGD*, 116. See the *Candlestand Statement* art. 3 (=1.1).

3.1.1.1.3.5 Conclusion

I hold that God makes Himself and His will known in all things that exist and happen. A number of His words and deeds have been recorded in Scripture because they are suitable for use by all of mankind. Thus the Scriptures are the glasses through which mankind learns to see divine revelation correctly. Hence Scripture is the standard by which man is to standardize all his knowledge and experience, and in extrapolation thereof, all confessing and teaching.

The foregoing has made clear that there is a determined, knowable standard on which man can draw for his faith convictions. It proves the legitimacy of the confessional endeavour in drawing on Scripture as its only source.

It is further clear that revelation and religion are to be distinguished, though not separated. While Scripture may contain religion, that is to say, human expressions of the experience of faith—one may think especially of the book of Psalms—their very inclusion in the canon of Scripture indicates that these may also be characterized as divine revelation, that is to say, God’s making-known to the world who He is.

This implies that Scripture is not just a testimony to divine revelation, not just another confession. It is divine revelation itself.

It also implies that confessions as *derived* from Scripture are not to be considered divine revelation. They have passed through the fallible filter of man’s reasoning and emotions, his faith experience.

3.1.1.1.4 Characteristics of Special Revelation

Confessing is a response to revelation and therefore is, in the Reformed tradition, standardized by special revelation. In order to make proper use of special revelation, it is necessary to have a clear view of its characteristics, for these characteristics will have consequences for the characteristics of confessing. For example, if Scripture is fallible, confessions are also; if Scripture is infallible, are confessions then also infallible?

Because I am referring to confessing that is common to Christ’s church, I am concerned with special revelation that is common to mankind today. The foregoing makes clear that this special revelation is found exclusively in Scripture. Thus I will look at the characteristics of Scripture: its authority and infallibility, its clarity, and its sufficiency.

3.1.1.1.4.1 The Authority and Infallibility of Holy Scripture.

The authority of Scripture is self-evident; Scripture is trustworthy in and of itself. For it is God who speaks in Scripture and His Word is truth (John 17:17). It is noteworthy that in the New Testament the mere quotation of a text from Scripture is sufficient to end a debate (e.g. Acts 15:15-18). Thus all books of the Bible are received for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith (BC art. 5). The authority of Scripture is not limited to just a part thereof.

A distinction frequently used is that of normative and historic authority. Historic authority indicates that the record is true to the facts, while normative authority indicates that the message is to be applied in human lives. Furthermore, the message of Scripture should be understood in its original time and context; although the claim that Scripture might be ‘time-bound’ goes too far. Scripture ought to be used with a view to what it sets out to achieve.

In general the Dutch Reformed prefer to speak of Scripture’s infallibility rather than its inerrancy. The phrase ‘inerrancy’ is considered to be rationalistic and to say too much.⁶⁴⁷ ‘Infallibility’ is to be understood as stating that Scripture does not fail to achieve what it sets out to achieve. One might also speak here of the ‘trustworthiness’ of Scripture. One must be careful, however, not to understand this ‘trustworthiness’ in the sense of ‘passed on in good faith but requiring verification as to its truth-content.’

⁶⁴⁷ “To be the trustworthy Word of God and the infallible rule for faith and life for us (see BC art. 5) the revelation which God has given us through the ministry of people, need not be free of all inaccuracies” (Van Genderen and Velema, *BGD*, 95; see Maris, *Geloof en Schriftgezag*, 33-34.)

Diermanse (2.12.2.8) describes Scripture as a collection of human thoughts on divine matters, and weighs the importance of Scripture passages from this perspective. He fails to consider the divine author in determining the weight of a passage. The very fact that something is included in Scripture by the Holy Spirit is proof of its importance for future generations (cf. John 20:30-31). One cannot sideline passages of Scripture the way Diermanse would allow.

Because Scripture is authoritative and infallible or trustworthy, it can serve as the standardizing standard (*norma normans*) for faith and thus faith-articulation in confessional writings.

3.1.1.1.4.2 Clarity of Scripture (Hermeneutics)

Not all that is in Scripture is immediately clear. “God’s Word reveals hidden things to us which go beyond our understanding. Even the most able exegetes of Scripture do not always agree and there are words of the Bible with which we have personal difficulties.”⁶⁴⁸ In varying situations Scripture will not always be equally clear: those who do not have the Spirit shall not understand (1 Cor. 2:14). Enlightenment is necessary (Eph. 1:18). However, what man needs to know is told us clearly (cf. WC I,7). Scripture explains itself, and the less clear should be explained in the light of the more clear.

The clarity of Scripture brings with it for the church the possibility and mandate to summarize in confessions what the Lord says in His Word. This is what Luther and Calvin called *doctrina* (instruction, teaching). Scripture speaks the decisive word for the confessing church.⁶⁴⁹

How is Scripture to be used in shaping one’s faith and thus determining one’s confession? When working with Scripture, one must make the passage from what is found in Scripture to one’s own time and context. There is thus an analogous element in the use of Scripture: there will be aspects identical to those found in Scripture and aspects that are different. J. Douma distinguishes four functions of Scripture, drawing on Scripture itself as his guide in determining these.⁶⁵⁰ These four can be used to derive prescriptions for conduct from Scripture (ethics), but can also be used to derive statements concerning reality from Scripture (dogmatics). I summarize the four briefly below. To each I have appended my own examples, the first of an ontological statement and the second of an ethical statement, that might find its way into a confessional writing.

Scripture is a guide: ontological and imperative statements in Scripture can be applied immediately (e.g. God is one, Love your neighbour).

Scripture is a guard: warnings against falsehoods and incorrect activities can be applied immediately (e.g. idols are no gods, do not oppress your citizens)

Scripture is a direction sign⁶⁵¹: there are truths and situations which are not found in Scripture but Scripture does give indications in which direction the answer should be sought (e.g. infant baptism, no cloning of human beings)

Scripture gives illustrations: narrative sections in Scripture can give us clues concerning reality and how we should act (e.g. God can appear in the form of man (Gen. 18), we should serve each other (John 13:1-20)).

When appealing to Scripture, careful note must be taken of the character and place of the text to which the appeal is made. Dogmatically, one should take into consideration the progressive character of special revelation; ethically, one should distinguish between the old and new covenant eras. One should also always keep in mind the purpose of Scripture (the goal of revelation). Scripture is not a textbook on astronomy, physics, or biology, nor an encyclopaedic account of the

⁶⁴⁸ Van Genderen and Velema, *BGD*, 101.

⁶⁴⁹ Van Genderen and Velema, *BGD*, 106.

⁶⁵⁰ Douma, *Grondslagen*, 88-123 (see Douma, *Ten Commandments*, 367-376).

⁶⁵¹ The term ‘compass’ is used in the translation of Douma’s work (Douma, *Ten Commandments*, 371-373). This however evokes a different image from the Dutch *richtingwijzer*. A direction sign is a fixed pointer while a compass gives different directions in different circumstances.

history of mankind or of Israel. That which is recorded in Scripture is recorded to convey a message to us (Rom. 15:4).⁶⁵²

Douma warns against two major abuses of Scripture. The first is fundamentalism, which reads Scripture 'literally'. Such biblicism takes texts out of their contexts and makes them say things they do not necessarily say. The second is that of imposing a model upon Scripture, which creates a canon within the canon of Scripture. Such a model may undermine the unity of Scripture and distort its message. Both biblicism and 'modelism' will distort the message of Scripture. I note that such distortions will have their repercussions for confessions. Biblicism has a tendency to reject the need for confessions, 'modelism' uses confessions to present a particular understanding of Scripture. One of the problems with the Articles of Arnhem (2.10.2.2.5) was that its opponents considered it 'modelistic'.

3.1.1.1.4.3 The Sufficiency or Perfection of Scripture

Scripture teaches us sufficiently what the will of God is and what man has to believe in order to be saved. Nothing else may be taught (Gal. 1:8). While it is true that the Spirit will guide us into all truth (John 16:13), this does not undermine the sufficiency of Scripture, for the Spirit will never teach anything contrary to what Scripture teaches (John 16:14,15). Thus traditions can never be standards for one's life of faith. They are no more than expressions thereof, forms in which people have given shape to their reaction to the Word of God. This tradition may, however, never be made independent from the words of Scripture.

Thus when it comes to the confessing of the church, Scripture will suffice as source and standard for the church's faith. This does not undermine the fact that one may draw on general revelation for one's faith, for all conclusions drawn from general revelation will be standardized and shaped by special revelation.

The argument that all ecclesiastical activity is to be standardized by Scripture alone and may not make use of concepts commonly accepted by men is, given the foregoing, flawed. The fields of anthropology, philosophy, and law may play a role in how the church gives form to its confessing. This is so, as long as these fields are not at odds with what Scripture teaches. By way of example, it will not do to say that, just because the apostles did not subscribe a confession, Christians today are not to do so either. The role that contractarian notions play in the having and subscribing of confessions can also serve as an illustration here.

3.1.1.1.4.4 Conclusion

Scripture is the final authority and thus can function as a standard for the confessing of the church. Scripture can also be used by the church in confessing, since Scripture is clear. In the use of Scripture, the church must discern how texts are to be understood in their contexts.

Finally, Scripture is sufficient as a source for the confessing of the church. General revelation may serve as a source, but only in the light of Scripture as special revelation.

In short, the premise that Scripture is the *norma normans* in confessing is correct.

3.1.1.1.5 Various Approaches to Revelation and Confessing in the 19th and 20th Centuries

Traditionally, the Dutch Reformed see revelation as the process by which God makes Himself known to mankind. This process serves to make mankind acquainted with God and to bring man to worship and serve God, God's original intent with man. Man's confessing is a reaction to this revelation. Thus Scripture is the record of God's speaking to man and confessions are the record of man's response to God's speaking.

The historical survey makes clear that there have also been other approaches. Modernists and many Conservatives (especially the Apologists and further those tending towards Traditionalism) saw revelation as the announcement of or reflection on reality. Those with a lower view of Scripture saw it as a collection of hypotheses concerning the truth that must be verified by the scientific method. Those with a higher view of Scripture saw it as a collection of truthful reports concerning events and/or reality that must be accepted on their own authority. Man's response was

⁶⁵² See the essays of De Bruijne, Kwakkel, and Van Houwelingen in De Bruijne, *Gereformeerde Theologie Vandaag*.

thus characterized as the summation of possibilities or truths that require rational assent. In this framework there is a tendency towards rationalist perfectionism, which means that the confessions must be continually updated in keeping with ‘further light’.

Groningers and Ethicals looked at man not as an observing being but as an existing being—man’s goal in life is not ‘to know and understand’ but ‘to live’. They considered revelation to be an educational process, and confessing as a form indicating how what has been learned has been digested, an exercise that must be repeated. In this framework there is a tendency to relativize confessions, even to the point that they are dismissed because they are ethically irrelevant.

During the course of the twentieth century there were various attempts to synthesize the two in some sort of compromise. The report *God met Ons* in particular testifies to this attempt. This synthesis creates room for both a rationalist as well as an ethical approach to Scripture and confessions. However, it fails to return to the position originally advocated by the Dutch Reformed. With their foundation undermined, the confessions are left hanging in the air. Their only virtue is that they represent the faith of the fathers and thus are admitted in the church as the voice of those who have gone before. This is the position that confessions subsequently came to hold in the PKN.

Thus the altered position of the confessions among the majority of the Dutch Reformed is due in part to a shift in the doctrine of revelation.

3.1.1.1.6 Conclusion

I consider it adequately illustrated that the doctrine of revelation is crucial when it comes to one’s position on confessions. Thinking through the logic of the various positions and comparing and contrasting these with each other, it becomes clear that the real issue is often not how one views the confessions but how one understands the workings of communication between God and man. Because confessions are historically derived from Scripture, if one touches Scripture, one has touched the confession.

For example, if all that is known about ‘Above’ has been formulated by ‘Below’, all formulations about ‘Above’—be they contained in the canon of Scripture, found in the writings of the church, or in a private publication—are in principle identical. Ecclesiastical confessing and even Scripture is no more than a subjective understanding of reality that at every point (even the existence of God!) may be disputed (cf. e.g. 2.12.2.7.7).

In Dutch Reformed circles, relinquishing the *sola Scriptura* of the Great Reformation was one of the key reasons why the confessions came to be under attack during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The course of history has made clear that those who challenge the position of the confession may well be seeking an escape from the assertions of Holy and Divine Scriptures itself.

In short, a vague notion of divine revelation has as a direct consequence the weakening of the authority of ecclesiastical confessional documents.

3.1.1.2 THE DOCTRINE OF MAN

In the Reformed tradition, the doctrine of man is as crucial to the issue of confessing as is the doctrine of revelation. For man is the agent of confessing, the one doing the confessing. The Reformed doctrine of man will present a background to why there is the urge to confess and to the characteristics of human confessing. It will help in understanding why, for example, the Calvinist Reformed such as A. Kuyper had a tendency towards perfecting confessional writings, and will give a background to the Ethical stance that confessing is a daring undertaking.

The following section is divided into four subsections. I will first look at man in his original state, since this describes God’s original purpose with mankind and the role which confessing plays herein (3.1.1.2.1). I will next review man in his fallen state in order to discover to what extent man can still fulfil this original purpose (3.1.1.2.2). Having discovered that man is totally incapable of doing what God would have him do, I then look at how God deals with the faults of man (3.1.1.2.3) and changes man (3.1.1.2.4). With respect to confessing, these latter two will make

clear how one should look at ‘sins’ in confessing such as inaccurate representation of divine revelation and man’s continued endeavour to confess.

In the course of these four sub-sections, various aspects of the doctrines of sin and soteriology will be considered.

3.1.1.2.1 Created Man

Unlike other creatures, which were created after their own kind, man was created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27).⁶⁵³ The ancient near-eastern world context indicates that ‘image’ should especially be understood in terms of representation: man is to represent God. This refers not to the physical attributes but to the actions of man. Man is the channel for God’s power. However, that is not all. Being in the image of God is not an addition to man (as if man was created and then made God’s image) but an integral part of man. Originally, man was supposed to image God, to echo His being. Being in the image of God has a relational side as well: man is God’s child, and man is to honour and glorify his Maker (Matt. 5:16). Thus there is communication between God and man. There is further an ontological aspect: the whole man is God’s image—he is God’s image in body and spirit.

Man’s active fulfilment of being God’s image can in part be characterized as confessing. In communicating with God, man makes clear how he has understood God’s revelation and glorifies God for Whom He is. Here we see man in spirit and body being the image of God. Furthermore, man’s confessing is part of the process of appropriating God’s directives for life and thus can serve to instruct him in what is required of him. Finally, by this confessing man reflects God and thus all of creation can see from this confessing how God is. In short, in his original state, man’s confessing served as praise of God, as a channel of appropriation and instruction of God’s will, and a declaration of mankind’s relationship to God.

Confessing is thus essential to man’s original state. Confessing can be described as an act in which man manifests himself as the image of God. By means of confessing he praises God, expresses his understanding of God’s will, and declares God’s being to all creation.

3.1.1.2.3 Fallen Man

After the fall into sin, man continues to be image of God.⁶⁵⁴ However, man is the image of God in negative mode: he is a mis-formed channel for God’s power, thus a radical renewal is necessary. As fallen man, man is a liar, untrustworthy, one who turns away from God (Rom. 3:9-20). He is no longer focused on serving God his Maker, but is focused on serving himself and his own ends. Man’s failing to be the image of God is sin. “Sin is the refusal to portray the image of the Father, and also to make visible in creation the Father in the relation to fellow-man and creation.”⁶⁵⁵

That man is called the image of God indicates what he was in the past and is to be in the future. There is thus a tension in man when it comes to his being the image of God.

On the one hand, much good can be said about man, who, equipped with the gifts of the image of God, can be active for the benefit of the world. On the other hand, he is often so far removed from the true service of God that he must be called a slave to sin and will not find the way to Christ on his own.⁶⁵⁶

In view of the fact that confessing is intricately associated with man’s being the image of God, the distortion of this image in man’s fallen state has consequences for man’s confessing. Among other things, it is in his confessing that this distortion comes to the fore.

⁶⁵³ In the most recent Dutch Bible translation, the NBV, this distinction between man and all other creatures has been obscured in the translation.

⁶⁵⁴ The perfect tense in James 3:9 expresses an accomplished act in the past that continues to have implications for the present.

⁶⁵⁵ Van Genderen and Velema, *BGD*, 308.

⁶⁵⁶ Douma, *Grondslagen*, 313.

First of all, having fallen into sin, man has the natural tendency to place himself ahead of God and others (cf. HC q&a 5). Thus his confessing will tend to be man-centred and cannot be characterized as God glorifying.

Secondly, man's reflection of God is not correct by definition, and thus by definition is always open to being corrected by God, who is to be imaged, and His Word. Man's confessing thus can not serve as an infallible guide in knowing God's will.

Thirdly, since man in his fallen state is a caricature of God rather than a perfect image, an individual's confession becomes a means by which can be seen how he views God his Maker, and what therefore he understands he should be imaging. Because mankind has relinquished the bond with God and become individualized, confessing has diversified among mankind. Hence man's confessing (as opposed to *mankind's* confessing) will now also serve to distinguish within mankind the varying relationships in which men stand to God.

Confessing thus remains essential to man in his fallen state. However, the distortion of God's image by man has seriously affected his confessing. It is no longer focused on the glorification of God, can no longer be trusted to present a true articulation of God's will, and has become a means by which to position individual men in their relationship to God their Creator.

3.1.1.2.4 Man Justified

As the second Man, Christ accomplished what the first Man Adam failed to do. He is thus the perfect man, the true image of God (Heb. 1:3). His work is for the salvation of those who believe in Him, granting them by grace the right to be children of God (John 1:12). Thus it is possible for man to live again in a positive covenantal relationship with God, and God, rather than consuming mankind in His anger, is prepared to accept mankind into loving communion with Him.

Justification is essential for the restoration of the relationship between God and man. Without justification, communication between God and man is a risky matter. God would destroy man, and therefore, in his patience, turns away from man (Rom. 1:24) and man would simply twist divine revelation (Rom. 1:21-23,25). Only in Christ is it possible for man to communicate rightly with God again (Heb. 10:19-22).

Justification can be characterized as 'forensic' and 'promissory'. It is forensic in that it involves an act of God that does not, strictly speaking, accord with reality. One is 'accounted, reckoned, considered' righteous, to use the terminology of Moses and Paul (e.g. Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4); the Heidelberg Catechism uses the term 'as if' (HC q&a 60). One may also describe justification as 'promissory'. God promises to forgive and overlook sins and shortcomings in the final judgement (Rev. 20:15).

Christ's work of justification makes the way free for man to be restored to his original state. In Christ, sins are forgiven, including the sins of falsely and inadequately imaging God. Man's errors and omissions in confessing evoke the wrath of God, but that wrath is stilled by the sacrifice of Christ. Thus, while God's demand to perfect confessing stands, imperfect confessing no longer disqualifies and condemns man before the face of God as such. It can only be considered condemning if it is not accompanied by a being recreated after the image of God.

The foregoing makes clear that while a tendency towards confessional perfectionism is justified since God upholds His demands, one should not lose sight of the fact that sins are also forgiven in confessing, such as shortfalls in confessing and unintentional errors in confessing. Erroneous faith convictions and confessional statements do not necessarily condemn one to God's eternal punishment. Hence doctrinal discipline need not necessarily imply exclusion from the kingdom of God. The decision of GS The Hague 1914 (2.10.2.2.3) is justified.

Thus man's justification restores his relationship with God. Imperfect confessing does not condemn man before God's throne as such.

3.1.1.2.5 Man Being Sanctified

In the process of recreation Christ is the norm and point of orientation, for He is Himself the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15). This process of recreation is commonly referred to as the

work of sanctification. In the Reformed tradition, one of the important distinctions between justification and sanctification is that justification, finding its crucial moment in the crucifixion, is often referred to with the past participle: ‘justified’. Sanctification, however, finding its crucial moment in the regeneration of man, is often referred to with the present progressive participle: ‘being sanctified’ or, if the final state is being considered, with a future participle ‘will be sanctified’.⁶⁵⁷ Sanctification is the process of coming to and persevering in faith, of daily repentance from sin, of daily conforming one’s life to God’s will. It is a process with ups and downs, progress and regress, a process in which it is clear that a person is drawing closer to God and His Kingdom. Sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit, who labours by dwelling in the heart of man. The work of sanctification is fully completed at the Return of Christ, for then body and soul will be reunited to live the perfect life. At the completion of sanctification stands man in his glorified state.

Sanctification is thus the initial cohabitation of God and man, and the restoration of man to his original capacities to image God. In this process, confessing plays its role. Confessing at any given moment reflects the point to which sanctification has come, the point to where the person has progressed. Because man is “being sanctified” his confessing in this earthly life will never be perfect. There will always be a struggle in confessing: to understand correctly, to strike the right tone, to speak the correct words. This conformation will first be visible in the heart or the will (cf. Rom. 7:15-16) and progressively manifest itself outwardly (Col. 3:5-17).

Finally, because being restored to the image of God is a work of the Spirit, confessing can be considered to be a direct fruit of the Spirit’s labour. This has implications for how one understands confessing in relation to divine revelation. Revelation, as the Spirit’s work, will always be normative for confessing, man’s action upon the instigation of the indwelling Spirit.

In short, man’s being sanctified is the process in which man is restored to his original state of being able to image God perfectly. This process is not necessarily linear; it is, however, progressive, culminating in the perfection of man. Confessing may be seen as a temporary testimony to sanctification, and thus, over time in the believer’s life, confessing will conform increasingly to God’s revelation, which is normative for confessing.

3.1.1.2.6 Conclusion

In summary, man was originally created in the image of God. One way in which this imaging was to become evident was through confessing. Man’s confessing glorified God, expressed man’s understanding of God’s will, and declared that will to all creation. The fall into sin implied that man was no longer able or willing to image God. His confessing was thus no longer conformed to God’s will. On account of this, man stood condemned before God. Man’s state of justification removes this state of condemnation and opens the way for his restoration to God’s image. This process of restoration, known as the work of sanctification, includes restoration of man’s capability to confess, which increasingly conforms itself to God’s norm.

The Scriptural doctrine of man brings with it a kind of tension in the life of a believer. On the one hand, there is confidence on account of the work of God: the believer is acceptable before God; he has forgiveness and receives the Spirit. On the other hand there is humility: the believer lives by grace, not own merit; there is still much sinfulness in his life and he has but a small beginning of the obedience God requires. Such tension will also be evident in the confessing of a believer. There will be boldness—one is confident of asserting God’s truth—yet also meekness—one acknowledges that assertions are being made by a sinful creature.

With respect to confessions and binding to confessional writings, it must be noted that the reflection on these matters takes place in the process of sanctification, under the umbrella of justification, with man’s fallen nature as starting point and man as God’s image as norm.

⁶⁵⁷ See the tenses of the verbs in Rom. 6:1-14.

Departure from the traditional Reformed standpoint on any of these will affect one's view of confessions, the way confessions operate, and the extent to which confessions may be considered binding.

For example, inaccuracy in confessing need not necessarily be a sign of unbelief. For it needs to be considered that sanctification is a process, and that therefore there may be growth in confessing. It also needs to be considered that justification applies no less to sins of the rational mind as it does to sins of the hands. Inclinations towards confessional perfectionism and ecclesiastical sectarianism may in fact be a sign of departure from Scriptural teachings on justification and sanctification.

Another example, taking us to the other extreme, is where confessions that are contradictory are held by the one group of believers. This position may be the result of the conviction that man himself is a source for the truth and, as man is plural, so confessing may be plural. The idea that man himself is a source for the truth may in turn have its origin in a denial of Scripture's exposition on man's origins, or because the depth of man's fall into sin is denied. This position is often also the result of the conviction that man seeks perfection in part on his own initiative and through his own power, as Pelagians and Remonstrants believe.

Both confessional perfectionism and confessional indifference may well have their source in a departure from the Reformed doctrine of man.

One can see this happen in various persuasions within the Dutch Reformed tradition.

Within the conservative camp there is a tendency towards confessional perfectionism and modern Donatism. With respect to the first one may think of the endeavours of the GKN during the first part of the twentieth century to come to new confessing, achieved in the adoption of the Doctrinal Declarations and resulting in the Liberation. Accusations of Donatism have been levelled at the GKN(v), especially during the course of the 1960s and 1970s.

Within the liberal camp the tendency is in the other direction. Modernists who had a high view of the scientific endeavour were influenced by evolutionist ideas and thus considered confessing as a snapshot of past convictions or hypotheses that had to be verified.

3.1.1.3 THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

This study is concerned with confessions and subscription to them within the sphere of the church. It makes sense, then, that one's understanding of the church will influence one's understanding of confessions and the role they play in the church. The historical survey suggests that differences with respect to the doctrine of the church, also referred to as ecclesiology, result in differences with respect to confessions and binding to them. The impact of ecclesiological convictions on the church and its confessing are clearly evident from the discussions held during the 1860s and 1870s in Reformed circles. R. de Reuver's dissertation defending the plurality found in the PKN⁶⁵⁸ also makes clear how determinative this matter can be for one's view of confessions and subscription to them.

In this subsection I will look at various aspects of the doctrine of the church as it relates to the confessing of the church. First I outline several thoughts that may be drawn from Scripture concerning the church, and outline how these relate to my subject matter (3.1.1.3.1). Next, several definitions for the terms 'church' and 'congregation' are considered, terms that play an important role in discussions between especially Ethicals and Calvinists (3.1.1.3.2). Then follows an overview of the essence of the church and where confessing belongs (3.1.1.3.3), the organization of the church and its consequences for the having and subscribing of confessions (3.1.1.3.4), and finally the goal and ministry of the church and the role that confessions fulfil therein (3.1.1.3.5).

3.1.1.3.1. Conclusions Drawn from Scripture

It would be ranging too far in the context of this study to set up an ecclesiology from Scripture. However, a confrontation with the Scriptural data does need to take place, given the role that

⁶⁵⁸ De Reuver, *Eén Kerk in Meervoud*.

Systematic Part

Scripture plays in orthodox Reformed theology and the role ecclesiology plays in the issue of confessions and confessional subscription. I turn therefore to Van Genderen and Velema's dogmatics and present in my own translation the main points that they draw from the Scriptural data. Their conclusions have been interspersed with my comments (italicized) linking them to the subject matter of this study.⁶⁵⁹

1. The church (the congregation) has its origin and existence in the work of God, who causes it to assemble to serve Him.

This point is important for determining the essence of the church and its goal. The confessing of the church must be aimed at the service of God. Further, confessional subscription is, in the Dutch Reformed tradition, an element in the process of 'assembling' the church: only those can become members in full-standing whose beliefs match those of the church as expressed in its confessions, and among churches the confessions form the basis for fellowship. How does this uniting through the confession relate to God's assembling the church?

2. The church was first gathered from Israel, later from Israel and the nations.⁶⁶⁰

This point emphasizes the singularity of the church, and thus its unity and catholicity. This implies that if the confessing of the church is considered to be an identifying mark of the church, the church is to be one in its confessing (see 3.1.1.3.3).

3. In the New Testament the church stands in the light of the kingdom of God, which has come and is coming. It lives of the gifts of God's kingdom and expects the coming of the kingdom in glory.

Standing in the light of God's kingdom also implies the proclamation of that kingdom. That proclamation is given shape, in part, by the confessing of the church.

4. Names such as 'people of God', 'body of Christ' and 'temple of the Holy Spirit' indicate that the church is the work of the triune God. Thus it is certain that it has a future. The expression 'body of Christ' speaks of a permanent bond with Christ, who is its Head. He governs it through His Word and Spirit.

Point 4 is relevant because it says something about the way in which the church is governed. The government of the church is Christocratic. In its confessing and binding to its confessing, the church is not to transgress a single command of Christ (see 3.1.1.3.4).

5. The communion with Christ is a communion through the Holy Spirit and from this flows forth the mutual communion of the members of the congregation.

This point makes clear that the church is a mystical body, which finds its deepest reasons for existence not in itself but in its Lord. This stands in contrast with those who view the church as simply a human society in which only the principles of the social contract or of associations function (see 3.1.1.3.3). It prevents a formalistic approach to the church's confessing, since this confessing is the expression of the communion with Christ, and fruit of the Spirit.

6. All offices and ministries are directed to the building up of the congregation and equipping it for its task.

Herewith is emphasized the relationship there is between the church and its office bearers: office bearers exist for the sake of the church. It forms a dogmatic foundation on which the practice of confessional subscription for office bearers and other ministries may be built.

⁶⁵⁹ Van Genderen and Velema, *BGD*, 616-622, the main points are found on page 622.

⁶⁶⁰ This conclusion can be critiqued in that it does not take into account the pre-Abrahamic people of God. The Heidelberg Catechism declares that the church gathering work is "from the beginning of the world to its end" (HC q&a 54).

7. Associated with the gifts that the church receives from God is its calling to live in this world as holy people of God, to testify of its Lord and win others to his service.

This point is relevant with respect to the functions that the confessing of the church (and thus its confessional statements) fulfil (see 3.3.5).

The foregoing makes clear that the doctrine of the church plays an important role in coming to a position on confessions and confessional subscription. All seven points are directly applicable to the subject matter of confessions. Differing positions on confessions and confessional subscription may in fact be the result of different ecclesiologies, some of which might not be true to Scripture.

3.1.1.3.2. Church and Congregation Defined

In both English and Dutch there are two terms used with respect to the gathering of those who believe in God. They are ‘church’ (*‘kerk’*) and ‘congregation’ (*‘gemeente’*). Though the terms are used variously in translations of Scripture, in the original languages there is fact only one term: ἐκκλησία in Hebrew and ἐκκλησία in Greek. Strictly speaking, both are best translated by ‘assembly’. The term *‘gemeente’* has its etymological roots in the concept *‘gemeenschap’* (‘communion’). The term *‘kerk’* (like the English ‘church’) has its etymological roots in the Greek term κυριακός , meaning “that which belongs to the κύριος (lord)”.⁶⁶¹

In Dutch circles, the terms ‘church’ and ‘congregation’ have been variously understood and distinguished from each other. For example the ‘congregation’ might be considered to comprise only the true people of God, while the ‘church’ is the combination of the congregation and world; or the ‘congregation’ might be considered to be the people of God as organically united and ‘church’ the people of God as institutionalized.⁶⁶²

Such distinctions, however, are untenable in the light of Scripture. To begin with, Scripture does not distinguish between an organic and institutionalized church in a categorical way. Nor does Scripture refer to a body within the assembly of believers as being the church, though Scripture does indicate that there can be unbelievers in the midst of the church (e.g. 1 John 2:19). Furthermore, such theories concerning the church have their origins in worldviews that are disputable and are formulated in accordance with debatable philosophical premises, especially those of Hegelian Idealism and evolutionism. Dogmatically, the terms ‘church’ and ‘congregation’ are interchangeable.⁶⁶³

From a church political perspective, distinctions are also frequently made. The ‘congregation’ is then considered to be the people of God as organized at the local level, i.e. the church as it meets in one place for worship, while the ‘church’ is the combination of congregations in various structures.⁶⁶⁴ The church political distinction is helpful in that it avoids confusion; it must not, however, lead to a dogmatic distinction, as if the congregation cannot be the church.

There is also a tradition, prevalent especially since the Doleantie, that considers the church to be either the local church as an autonomous body or the universal church. Groups of local churches are referred to as associations of churches, with the plural emphasized.⁶⁶⁵ I admit that it is debatable whether Scripture does indeed refer to a group of churches with the singular ἐκκλησία .⁶⁶⁶

⁶⁶¹ BDB, Bauer, Van Dale, and Noordegraaf, *WvB*, s.v. “*Gemeente, kerk, lichaam des Heren*”.

⁶⁶² See Chantepie de la Sausaye (2.7.2.11 and 2.8.2.11) and Kuiper (2.9.2.6).

⁶⁶³ See BC art. 27 in the French and Latin editions. In the translations, the Dutch uses the terms *‘kerk’* and *‘vergadering’*, the English ‘church’ and ‘congregation and assembly’.

⁶⁶⁴ See, for example, articles 1-3 of the Church Order of the PKN (PKN, *KO en ordinanties*, 9-10).

⁶⁶⁵ Hence *Gereformeerde Kerken* in Nederland (see Deddens, “Een Bond van Kerken”).

⁶⁶⁶ Those arguing against using the term “church” for a supra-local assembly of believers point out that Acts 9:31 has a textual problem and that Gal. 1:2 clearly uses the plural. See De Jong, *Bound Yet Free*, 65-103.

However, other biblical and dogmatic arguments may be adduced to justify referring to a supra-local body of believers with the singular church.⁶⁶⁷

For the purposes of systematization, it would be preferable to refer to the most restricted organizational unit of believers consistently as ‘congregation’ or ‘local church’, and broader units of believers as ‘classical church’, ‘regional church’, ‘national church’⁶⁶⁸ and ‘global church’.⁶⁶⁹ With respect to broader units of believers, it may be noted that, in general, reference will be to the bodies that have authoritative jurisdiction in these churches, e.g. the classis, regional synod, general synod, and ecumenical council.

For the sake of clarity I point out that the local congregation is *ecclesia completa*, not a branch or part of the church. On the other hand, the supra-local church is not just the sum total of local churches. It too is an *ecclesia completa*.⁶⁷⁰

Understanding the organic unity not only of the congregation or local church but also of congregations in their bond together as the church emphasizes the fact that those matters that are essential to the church must be held in common among all. One of these is the confession of faith. This implies that the confession of faith held in the local church is to be identical to the confession of faith held in the regional church and the national church.

Thus the structure of the PKN, which allows local congregations to hold their own confessional emphases, cannot be considered conducive to expressing the unity of the church. Likewise, a national church that is made up of regional churches not geographically organized (classes) but theologically orientated can also not be considered conducive to expressing the unity of the church.

3.1.1.3.3. The Essence of the Church

Having looked at Scriptural data on the church and at the usage of the terms ‘church’ and ‘congregation’, I now turn to the basic question, ‘what is the church?’ There is both a divine side and a human side to the existence of the church. This will first have my attention (3.1.1.3.3.1). I will next look at distinctions made with respect to the church: visible and invisible, organic and institutional, spiritual and denominational (3.1.1.3.3.2); these distinctions have varying consequences for one’s understanding of confessions. Finally, I will review the attributes of the church (3.1.1.3.3.3) and the marks of the church (3.1.1.3.3.4), and look at how these relate to confessing.

3.1.1.3.3.1 The Church as God’s Work and a Human Manifestation

The essence of the church is determined by the fact that the church belongs to God and Christ. It is a work of God in Christ. The church belongs to its Lord, it is κυριακός. The essence of the church is thus not to be determined by empirical observations but by divine revelation.

However, the church is not just something mystical, it is also a tangible reality; the church is visible, it has an address. Moreover, it is a reality in a broken and sinful world. It cannot claim to be untouched by this distortion and sinfulness. Finally, the church manifests itself within the social

⁶⁶⁷ See Rutherford, *Due Right of Presbyteries*, 50ff; Graham, "Presbytery". Even those churches that insist on the plural consider this to be a minor point of Church Order and ecclesiastical practice since they enjoy sister-church relationships with Presbyterian churches which use the singular (e.g. de GKN(v)).

⁶⁶⁸ The OPC uses the term ‘whole church’, which makes sense since it has congregations in more than one nation. In The Netherlands the term ‘national’ is often used, though most associations of churches also have or have had churches in other nations (e.g. the GKN[s] in Germany, the CGKN in Belgium, and the GKN(v) in Brazil). See further Golverdingen, *Strijd om het Kerkrecht*, 5.9.3.1, 5.11.1.

⁶⁶⁹ See De Reuver, *Eén Kerk in Meervoud* 13, who, in line with the Church Order of the PKN, uses ‘congregation’ for the ‘local church’ and ‘church’ for the national church. See also Presbyterian practice as outlined, for example, in the OPC Book of Church Order (OPC, *OPC Church Order*, articles 13-15).

⁶⁷⁰ See Deputaten voor de eenheid van gereformeerde belijdenis in Nederland van de CGKN, *Zoeken naar Kerkelijke Eenheid*, 11-20.—Differences between Dortian Reformed polity and Westminster Presbyterian polity will be discussed in 3.1.1.3.4.2.2.

spheres of mankind. It will thus portray cultural influences in its structures. Thus the manifestation of the church clearly also has a human side.

That the church is God's work means that we are not to relativize the essence of the church. That the church is a human manifestation implies that we are not to make every aspect of the church infallible. One must carefully study the being and actions of the church to discern between what is divine what is human, between that which is infallible and that which is fallible. In doing so, one must never lose sight of the fact that the two cannot be clinically separated. That which binds—God's love for man and man's faith in God—is essential to the church. One might say that the cord is more prominent than the strands that make up the cord.

For example, when it comes to the confessing of the church, discerning the elements is an intricate endeavour. The confessing of the church is as act an expression of human faith seeking in its essence to reflect the divine will. The 'cord' (confessing) is more prominent than the 'strands' (faith and divine will).

In determining the essence of the church, dogmatic considerations hold priority over considerations from other fields of science (anthropology, sociology, law). With Van Genderen and Velema, I reject descriptions of the church as 'genootschap' ('society' - Schleiermacher) or 'vereniging' ('association' - Kersten).⁶⁷¹ To these may be added the idea that the church has its origin and being in some form of social contract.⁶⁷²

Many of the publications on confessional subscription during the 1830s betray such contractarian elements. When reviewing [Borneman] (2.5.2.3) I defined two lines of argument for confessional subscription: a spiritual line (God demands it) and a natural line (natural rights such as that of association and disassociation, and civil duties). This was also one of the few points on which in the eighteenth century Bonnet and Goodricke could agree. The older Supernaturalists Heringa and Royaards, the Calvinist Le Roy, and possibly De Cock as well, also employed this argument, albeit then to argue that the Reformed (Calvinist) Church has the right to distinguish itself from other branches of the Christian Church. One person who did feel that this idea was damaging was Da Costa, although admittedly Da Costa was thinking more of society in general and the state than the church.⁶⁷³

Gunning jr. suggested that Groen drew on secular notions for his view on the church (cf. 2.8.2.8). It is quite likely that Gunning was thinking here of, among other things, elements of the social contract.

In their debate, Muurling and Doedes both took a horizontal view of the church: it is an institution of men voluntarily associated (cf. 2.8.2.10). This is clearly contractarian.

With respect to the Apologists more can be said. Both Van Oosterzee and Doedes defended the need for a confession. They justified this, it would seem, on the basis of contractarian principles. Their concern was not so much with 'the confessions of the NHK' as 'a confession for a church' although, given the situation in which they found themselves as members of the NHK, they had to apply their theory to the Three Forms of Unity. In its simplest form, their position was: the church is an association for religion, an association must have a constitution and regulations, a confession is the constitution for the church-association, therefore the members of the church-association (especially its functionaries) must subscribe the confession (cf. 2.7.2.8, 2.8.2.10, 2.9.2.4). It is clear that the Apologists indeed looked at the church within the contractarian framework. It is one of the reasons why their stance on confessions and subscription as a whole cannot be considered to be fully in line with Scripture.

With A. Kuyper the picture is more mixed. Kuyper very clearly rejected a church concept based on contractarian ideas, yet notions such as democratic rule and consensus do play an important role in his view of the church as an institution. He considered democracy to be Scriptural and Calvinistic. To his way of thinking, such democracy (sovereignty of the people) was not at odds with the sovereignty of Christ, since Christ, through His Spirit, dwells in His people. (2.9.2.6). One might say that Kuyper advocated the forms of the contractarian idea without adopting its underlying principles.

⁶⁷¹ Van Genderen and Velema, *BGD*, 630.

⁶⁷² See further 3.1.1.3.4, on the organization of the church.

⁶⁷³ On contractarianism in general see Gough, *The Social Contract*. On the irreconcilability of contractarianism and divine right government in state and church see Da Costa, *Bezwaren*, 33-44.

Haitjema defended an organic view of the church and opposed a contractarian view (cf. 2.10.2.3). However, in view of the fact that the church is not merely God's work but at the same time a human manifestation, there is room for the church in its manifestation to follow principles of a contractarian type. His conclusion, therefore, that the church ought to be a confessing church (organic view) rather than a confession church (contractarian view) is flawed. The dilemma is false: in holding confessions the church is confessing.

The confessions have been described as an accord for cohabitation. It should be noted that it is not the confessions as such that are the accord, but it is the faith that they bring to expression that binds the churches spiritually together. Hofstede de Groot was correct in pointing out that what binds the churches organizationally together is not the confessions but the order of the church (cf. 2.6.2.4).

3.1.1.3.3.2 Distinctions with respect to the Church

In the Reformed tradition one frequently encounters a distinction between the visible church and the invisible church. A clear distinction between the two does not exist. The invisible church is generally considered to be the perfect church, the church as God sees it, the communion of the elect. The visible church is generally considered to be the imperfect church, the church as the world perceives it, the communion of those who profess to believe in God. Calvin spoke of the church *coram Deo* and *respectu hominum*.⁶⁷⁴ The distinction is legitimate, provided that one does not conclude from it the existence of two churches rather than one church. It is therefore more accurate to speak of the 'unoverseeability' of the church. The distinction impinges on the role of confessions in the church when it is argued that confessions are only part of the visible church.

Similar to the distinction between the invisible and visible church is the Ethical distinction between the congregation and the church (cf. 3.1.1.3.2). In this perspective, the congregation, in many ways similar to the invisible church, is a mystical, non-tangible entity. Because of its intangible character, confessional statements cannot be considered to belong to it—they are part of the church (the visible church)—and the weapons with which falsehood is warded off and attacked must be spiritual rather than judicial (cf. Chantepie de la Saussaye (2.7.2.11 & 2.8.2.11) and Gunning jr. (2.8.2.3&8))

The distinction between invisible and visible church is in some ways paralleled by the distinction between the organic church (as the essence of the church) and the institutional church (as the form of the church). In this framework, confessional statements are considered to be part of the form of the church, not of the essence of the church (cf. A. Kuyper (2.9.2.6)).

Of a more recent date is the distinction between the spiritual church (one may here think of the 'ecumenics of the heart') and the organized church (referred to as 'the denomination'). In this context, confessional statements are considered to be expressions of one's own identity rather than expressions of the catholic faith held by the universal church.

I conclude that distinguishing between the church and the congregation, the organic church and the institutional church, the spiritual church and the organized church, to the extent of separating them, is invalid, just as one cannot segregate the visible from the invisible church. Confessional statements and subscription to confessions are tangible realities, but this is no reason to relegate them to outside what is truly considered the church. Confessions not only exist for the *well being* of the church, they are in their essence part of the *being* of the church.

3.1.1.3.3.3 The Attributes of the Church

In the tradition of the early church there are four attributes of the church. With the words of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. These attributes are both a given for the church and a calling: they describe what the church is as well as what it is to become.⁶⁷⁵

⁶⁷⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.7.

⁶⁷⁵ Besides Van Genderen and Velema, *BGD* see Balke, "Eigenschappen", 259-297.

The unity of the church. As a given, this is clearly indicated in Scripture (e.g. Acts 2:41-47; 1 Cor. 12:4-27). Unity has its origin and foundation in the oneness of God (John 17; Eph. 4:1-6) and consists in the unity of the true faith. With Calvin, this unity may be considered to be evident in doctrine and love.⁶⁷⁶ “Over against heresy the boundaries of the church become clear in the confession.”⁶⁷⁷ God’s people are called upon to be one not only in spirit but also in organization.⁶⁷⁸ Unity in organization does not imply uniformity; it focuses on unity in seeking the same goal and travelling along the same road. “Existing diversity in the churches is not contrary to biblical unity but ecclesiastical division is.”⁶⁷⁹ There is thus a call for all that is the church to be united, and this church must separate itself from all that is not the church. “The splintering and division of the church is sin and at odds with Christ’s explicit command.”⁶⁸⁰ The unity of the church is, from the perspective of its catholicity, the ecumenical church, but the unity is most evident where the universal church manifests itself locally. Churches that recognize themselves in each other to the extent that they consider themselves united in spirit should also strive for organizational unity.⁶⁸¹

The doctrine of the pluriformity of the church teaches that the church manifests itself in various forms. The question with respect to the pluriformity doctrine is what falls within the limits of pluriformity and what falls outside it. Traditionally, the Reformed have considered the confessional truth to be free from pluriformity: they called their confessions Forms of Unity for a good reason. There is a true church and there is a false church, there is a real church and there is a counterfeit church (BC art. 29). A. Kuyper, however, suggested that the church’s pluriformity can also be seen in its confessing. God’s infinite truth cannot be contained in any single form of man, and thus confessions complement each other. Hence a preference arose to speak of churches that are more pure and less pure.⁶⁸² The question is, however, whether Kuyper’s approach does not undermine the conviction expressed in the Belgic Confession that there is a true church and a false church. Pluriformity is not limitless. Confessions play a vital role in determining where the boundaries of the church are, whether a body can be characterized as a church or not.⁶⁸³

In his dissertation, Dr. R. de Reuver defines pluriformity as “the manifold unfolding of a presupposed unity”, while pluralism “is the moral theory which proceeds from plurality (manyness).” He considers pluriformity to be an inadequate expression, because it presupposes unity while today’s culture takes its starting point in manyness. Hence he prefers the term pluralism and uses this to express “the manyness of cultures, people and substantial faith expressions within congregations and church.”⁶⁸⁴ Having studied some Scriptural data, De Reuver concludes that there are boundaries to the church—nothing may touch the foundation of the Church which is Jesus Christ—but there is room for a manyness of “forms of faith and testimonies to faith”.⁶⁸⁵ There is an epistemological motive for the manyness in the church: God can only be

⁶⁷⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.ii.5.

⁶⁷⁷ Balke, "Eigenschappen", 265.

⁶⁷⁸ Schilder, *De Kerk*, vol. 3:129.

⁶⁷⁹ Van Genderen and Velema, *BGD*, 645.

⁶⁸⁰ Balke, "Eigenschappen", 261.

⁶⁸¹ Trimp, *The Church*, 58.

⁶⁸² See De Reuver, *Eén Kerk in Meervoud*, 25-26.

⁶⁸³ Thus CGKN deputies for the unity of Reformed Confessors in The Netherlands wrote: “We are convinced that distinction must be made between matters that are essential for the church and matters which are not. The standard for this can be none other than that of Scripture and confession.” “The basis on which unity should be and must be sought can be no other than that which counts as basis for ‘our own’ churches. The Forms of Unity are the basis for the association of churches and rightly so.” (Deputaten voor de eenheid van gereformeerde belijdenis in Nederland van de CGKN, *Zoeken naar Kerkelijke Eenheid*, 28 and 30.)

⁶⁸⁴ De Reuver, *Eén Kerk in Meervoud*, 31-33. De Reuver points to W. Pannenberg as also defending this understanding.

⁶⁸⁵ De Reuver, *Eén Kerk in Meervoud*, 135. Analysing De Reuver’s argument there is in fact only one text which he adduces to justify a manyness in doctrine in the congregation: Eph 3:18-19. In exegeting Eph. 3:19 he interprets ‘knowing’ and ‘knowledge’ in the sense of ‘understanding’ and concludes “On account of [the fact that the love of Christ and the fullness of God surpass all understanding] every exclusive claim to the truth of a person or group within the Christian community is radically cut off and the catholicity of the church is posited.” De Reuver, *Eén Kerk*

comprehended by a plurality of saints; on the other hand there are limits to this plurality—those who do not confess Christ come in the flesh and who introduce other gods are to be excluded from the church.⁶⁸⁶ In the New Testament, De Reuver argues, we see a plurality among congregational members, among congregations and with respect to truth.⁶⁸⁷ De Reuver's stance can be seen as a defence of the existence of the PKN; his thoughts are very much in the line of those prevalent in the *Samen op Weg* process (cf. 2.13). In fact, such ideas were already expressed by W. Broes early in the nineteenth century (2.4.5.3).

Van Genderen and Velema argue that the idea of a pluralist church is to be rejected since it allows individualism and subjectivism to determine the character of the church, whereas it is God who gathers the church. Moreover, the church is called to be the pillar and bulwark of the truth (1Tim 3:15); to that end the truth it broadcasts must be one.⁶⁸⁸

Structurally, both the De Reuver and Van Genderen and Velema argue the same, but substantially they differ. De Reuver's "substantial faith expressions" include the confessions of the church and Van Genderen and Velema consider the confessions as a primary means by which the church is pillar and bulwark of the truth. Thus De Reuver allows for a manyness in confessions⁶⁸⁹ while Van Genderen and Velema do not. The questions are thus raised whether confessions ought to function as forms of unity, and if so, whether the Three Forms of Unity, unchanged, can function as such, the very point at which Groen van Prinsterer and Da Costa parted ways.

The holiness of the church. The holiness of the church brings to the fore that the church is special, distinct, separated. This separation lies in the fact that it belongs to God, with as consequence that it seeks to serve God and not itself or man. The holiness of the church is frequently indicated in Scripture (e.g. John 17:19; 1 Pet. 2:9). The church has the calling to be holy, to which end Christ is at work for it (Eph. 5:27) and the Spirit labours in its midst (2 Tim. 2:13) until it reaches perfection (Rev. 21:2, 10, 27). The holiness of the church calls for purity in doctrine and godliness in life, the church is to be sinless.⁶⁹⁰

Because the church *is holy*, it has to fight against becoming part of the world. It is not to become part of the world in order to win the world, but is to distinguish itself from the world. Because the church *is to become holy*, ecclesiastical perfectionism such as that defended by Donatism and Labadism is to be rejected. While the church strives for perfection, inability to achieve perfection does not mean that it is not the church. The church thus stands in a field of tension.

This tension is strongly felt in, among other things, the enforcement of confessional subscription. When is a group of people truly a church, and when is a group of people no longer a real church? It is drawing the line, and to that end determining which factors impact upon the drawing of that line, that initiates many of the debates on confessional subscription. This discussion spills over into a discussion on confessional statements as such, especially in those circles where confessions

in Meervoud, 75-76, 82, 83 (the quote is from page 83). However, both 'comprehending' and 'knowing' would more appropriately be understood here in the sense of 'having experience with', given the object of this knowing, the love in Christ. (See Hendriksen, *Galatians & Ephesians*, 172-173; Floor, *Efeziërs*, 137-138). De Reuver's conclusion is thus not warranted, namely that Eph. 3:18-19 should justify multiple understandings (and thus certainly not *contradictory* understandings) of God's fullness and Christ's love. Eph. 3:18-19 makes clear that different people will experience God's fullness and Christ's love in different ways and that these different ways complement each other to paint a more complete picture.

⁶⁸⁶ De Reuver, *Eén Kerk in Meervoud*, 275-276.

⁶⁸⁷ De Reuver, *Eén Kerk in Meervoud*, 291-292. I can agree with the first but not with the last two, plurality among congregations and plurality with respect to truth. One of the points of the letter to the Ephesians is precisely that there is to be no division within the local congregation (see De Reuver, *Eén Kerk in Meervoud*, 307-308). Thus there ought not to be a plurality of congregations. Further, while one's understanding of truth may be contextually determined so that different contexts result in different actions with respect to truth (De Reuver points to circumcision and the eating of meat offered to idols) this does not touch the essence of truth itself. The New Testament does not allow for a plurality of truth but for a plurality of practising truth.

⁶⁸⁸ Van Genderen and Velema, *BGD*, 646.

⁶⁸⁹ See De Reuver, *Eén Kerk in Meervoud*, 309-311.

⁶⁹⁰ Balke downplays the moral element, arguing that orthodoxy has priority over orthopraxy (Balke, "Eigenschappen", 270-271).

are considered to be delimiting. The question then is whether a certain matter ought to be contained in a confessional statement or not.

Over time this issue has been variously debated. During the nineteenth century it was this matter that broke up successive organizations of Calvinists (cf. 2.7.2.10 and 2.8.2.7). In the twentieth century, one of the debates focused on what might be required of church members to be members of the church in full standing (cf. 2.14.2.1.5-6). It is also the fundamental issue in every gravamen submitted to have confessions revised (e.g. cf. 2.10.2.2.1,5) and every doctrinal trial (e.g. cf. 2.10.2.2.4,7 and 2.12.2).

The catholicity of the church. The church is universal, general, common, for God is active for the sake of the whole world, for all of mankind (John 3:16; Matt 28:19; Titus 2:11). This catholicity is, like the other attributes, both a given and a calling. The catholicity of the church has a quantitative aspect (in all times and places) and a qualitative aspect (in the unity of the true faith). Calvin describes this qualitative aspect as “agreeing on the one truth of divine doctrine, and bound by the bond of the same religion.”⁶⁹¹ As a calling, catholicity implies that all one-sidedness be avoided and many-sidedness be striven for. “We are not allowed to exclude churches and Christians who are not excluded by Christ, nor may we include what He does not include.”⁶⁹² The church seeks fullness, and in so doing must break through natural, geographical, ethnic, social, political, cultural, and philosophical barriers. The only barrier it may not break through is the religious barrier, since doing so would be relinquishing its character as the church of Jesus Christ.

I purport that the catholicity of the church implies its confession is also to be catholic. This has been the position held in the Calvinist tradition. For evidence, one may point to the ecumenical symbols. Whether the same can be said of later confessions is a point of debate. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there were attempts to make this explicit through harmonizations of Reformed confessions. In the course of time, however, confessions tended to be seen more as identity-documents for national and regional churches. Given the present era of globalization, I believe the global church ought to seize the opportunity to bring to expression the catholicity of its confession.⁶⁹³

Van Ruler (2.12.2.1) is one of those who has adequately argued that confessions mark the boundaries of the catholic church. In essence, confessions may thus not be used to distinguish between churches that consider each other real or true as opposed to counterfeit or false. For example, Scottish Presbyterians and Dutch Reformed ought not use the Westminster Confession and Belgic Confession respectively to stress their identity if they consider themselves united in the faith.

The apostolicity of the church. The church carries the mark of the apostles and continues their work. It implies remaining faithful to the instruction of the apostles (Acts 2:42). Their instruction is found in the canonical New Testament books. The church is to continue to pass this message on (2 Tim. 2:2) and to mark all that is false (Gal. 1:6-9). Thus the church is where the Word is. “The church ought to and must be conservative, it must preserve the Word of God. It is not prophetic, but apostolic,” it does not add to the Word of God but spreads the Word of God.⁶⁹⁴

It should be noted that apostolicity and apostolate are thus not identical concepts. The apostolate refers to the missionary character of the church: the church exists for the world (cf. Van Ruler, 2.11.2.5).

The apostolicity of the church brings with it the need to articulate the message. Confessions play an important role in this process of articulation and carrying forth. Thus the church teaches what it was taught and reaches out to those who do not yet share in God’s salvation.

Van Genderen and Velema point out that new articulations and formulations of the Christian faith run the danger of causing ‘issues presently in debate’ and ‘reaching the people’ to overrule

⁶⁹¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.9.

⁶⁹² Van Genderen and Velema, *BGD*, 653.

⁶⁹³ This might best be achieved through a body such as the International Conference of Reformed Churches or the World Reformed Fellowship.

⁶⁹⁴ Balke, “Eigenschappen”, 281.

*continuity with the confessing of the past.*⁶⁹⁵ It should be noted that the same applies to confessions that the church at present has. The ecumenical creeds and Reformed confessions all display emphases that are time-related.⁶⁹⁶ This would seem to suggest that it cannot be otherwise. One may also posit that sharper distinctions should be drawn within the body of confessional statements as to what is time-related and what is not, what is contextual and what is not. (See further 3.3.10).

The four attributes together. These attributes are not to be played off against each other or prioritized. Each is equally important and ought to be equally present. Moreover, these attributes are not static but bring with them something dynamic: they repeatedly form a calling that the church must fulfil.

A tension is often felt between the unity and catholicity of the church on the one hand and the holiness and apostolicity of the church on the other. In Dutch reformed circles, an emphasis on unity and catholicity was or is evident in the NHK, GKN[s], and PKN. There was or is a tendency to overemphasize holiness and apostolicity within the GKN, GKN(v), and the various *Gereformeerde Gemeenten*. It is the task of the church to reflect on all its four attributes and seek ways in which they may function concurrently.

Confessions stand at the crossroads of these attributes. For it is in its confessing that the church makes clear who it is, what its attributes are.

The SoW process (2.13.1.2.9) makes clear that prioritizing the apostolate (catholicity) has as its result a marginalization if not minimization of confessional faithfulness (apostolicity).

The GKN[s] considered that κοινωνία (unity of the church) should have priority over doctrinal purity (apostolicity) (2.12.2.7.11). In view of the foregoing, this position is untenable.

Vlijm concluded that there is tension between the unity and apostolicity of the church as well as between catholicity and holiness (2.13.1.2.4). I point out that while such tension may indeed exist in practice, it is not inherent to these attributes of the church. All should therefore be done to bring these four into concert. Attention for a particular attribute ought never to be at the cost of another attribute.

3.1.1.3.3.4 The Marks of the Church

It is not only important to know *what* the church is but also *where* it is. Hence the Reformed also speak of the marks of the church, those points by which it may be recognized. Traditionally, the marks of the church are the pure preaching, pure administration of the sacraments, and proper exercise of discipline.⁶⁹⁷

After the Reformation it became commonplace to speak of more pure and less pure churches (e.g. WC chapter XXV). This terminology was used to indicate that some churches are closer to the ideal church as described in Scripture than others. In the Reformed tradition, it has happened that this distinction was considered to be an alternative to the distinction true and false church. I consider the dilemma false. The distinction ‘more pure’ and ‘less pure’ churches functions within the sphere or set of true churches.⁶⁹⁸

⁶⁹⁵ Van Genderen and Velema, *BGD*, 656.

⁶⁹⁶ The time-related character of the creeds and confessions can be illustrated as follows. Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed with its line “light of light, very God of very God; begotten, not made; being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.” The Apostles’ Creed in its omission of the doctrine of revelation. The Athanasian Creed with its comparison of the human and divine natures of Christ with the existence of a human being in body and soul. The Belgic Confession in its failure to state something on marriage. The Heidelberg Catechism in its emphasis on the sacraments. The Canons of Dort in the limitation of their subject matter (it is, of course, a point of debate whether the Canons of Dort should even be seen as a confession in their own right, but rather as an appendix to the Belgic Confession).

⁶⁹⁷ Van Genderen, “Kenmerken”, 283-297. At the bottom of these three marks would seem to lie the Reformed triad doctrine, worship, and order.

⁶⁹⁸ See Van Genderen, “Kenmerken”, 290, Clark, *What Do Presbyterians Believe?*, 222-224.

The marks of the church do not depend on the marks of the Christians. They depend on whether the church is ruled by Christ (John 10:27). However, one cannot abstract the church from its members: hypocrites are not truly members of the church.

The confessing of the church must, by definition, evidence the marks of the church insofar as confessing can do so. As formulations of God's will, the church's confessing forms part of its preaching. Thus confessions are to be faithful to Scripture. As articulations of God's will, the church's confessing can also function as a guideline for doctrine and life. As such they play a role in the discipline exercised by the church.

3.1.1.3.3.5 Summary

By way of summary, the church is both a work of God and a human manifestation. As a result, there will be both divine elements and human elements in its constitution. With respect to its confessing, this is certainly the case: it is an expression of human faith born from a work of God and seeking to reflect the divine will. Though the church is 'unoverseeable' this does not make it invisible. Visible realities belong to the essence of the church, including its confessional statements and structures relating to them. The four attributes of the church—its unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity—have direct consequences for its confessing. The confessing of the church is to display its oneness, its sanctity, its breadth and its faithfulness to the apostolic tradition. The three marks of the church—faithful in preaching, faithful in administration of sacraments, and faithful in discipline—impact less directly on its confessing. In displaying God's will, the confessions are a form of preaching and thus need to be faithful. As an instrument by which the church holds itself to God's Word, it forms part of the discipline in the church, and needs to be in accordance with Christ's commandments.

It is evident that one's understanding of the essence of the church can have far-reaching consequences for one's view of confessions and confessional subscription.

3.1.1.3.4 The Organisation of the Church

The need to have confessional statements, and especially binding thereto, has been hotly debated since such statements were written. Part of this debate is the question whether the church has the right to prescribe formulas for faith and to bind to them. Is there not freedom of thought and freedom of speech? Moreover, the question may also be asked whether the governing structures within the church are proper, proper in the sense that they are permissible and proper in the sense that they achieve their goal. Some have argued that the Reformation was about freeing oneself from every form of conscience-binding authority, and others have argued that the Dortian system of subscription errs in that it can result in the exclusion of persons from the church.

In this subsection, the jurisdiction (3.1.1.3.4.1) and government (3.1.1.3.4.2) of the church as indicated by Scripture and given shape in the Dutch Reformed tradition will be given attention.

3.1.1.3.4.1 The Jurisdiction of the Church

In Scripture, the power (*potestas*) of the church is described as the power of the keys. The key-holder in those days was not simply someone who could open and close a door, but someone who had authority over who could enter through that door. One might compare it today to someone who has the code to a safe. The keys have been granted to Christ (Rev. 3:7) who shares them with others (Matt. 16:19; 18:18). In view of the plural pronoun in Matt. 18:18, the conclusion is warranted that the keys were not entrusted to Peter alone, but to the circle of apostles. Given the context of this verse, where mention is made of the ἐκκλησία, the conclusion is also warranted that the power of the keys has been granted to the church.⁶⁹⁹

If the church shares in the power of the keys, if it has been given the right to participate in determining who enters the kingdom of God and who is to be excluded from that kingdom, there

⁶⁹⁹ Van Genderen and Velema, *BGD*, 674-675.

must also be a standard by which to make such a determination. That standard is Christ, His teaching as passed on in the instruction of the apostles (Matt. 28:20). The church is not to add or remove from this teaching, nor to proclaim a different teaching (Gal. 1:8; Rev. 22:18-19). Instead, the church is called upon to contend for the faith *once for all* entrusted to it (Jude :3).

When it comes to exercising the power of the keys, the church must act in concert with heaven (Matt. 18:18⁷⁰⁰). The church has the right and duty to receive all who confess to believe in Christ and act accordingly (Eph. 2:14-17; 4:3). The church also has the right and duty to cut ties with those not willing to comply with the teaching of Christ (1 Cor. 5:13; 2 John :9-10).

The church's confessing may thus never function as a standard of truth. When it comes to the truth, Scripture and Scripture alone may be the judge. So it was that the Synod of Dort 1618-19 acted towards the delegates from Overijssel (2.2.2.4). While the church's confessing can be considered normative when it has been standardized by Scripture, I believe the designation 'standardized standard' (*norma normata*) has proven confusing. The perfect tense of 'standardized' could be understood to suggest that it is a standard that can never be changed. On this score, the advice of the foreign delegates to the Dutch churches to maintain this faith until Christ's kingdom comes was saying slightly too much. It would have been more correct to advise the Dutch churches to continue conforming their faith to the words of Scripture and maintain the teaching of Christ until His kingdom comes. Considering the confessing of the church to be a standardized standard runs the risk of petrifying it and even elevating it to the level of Scripture. It might be more appropriate to catch the problem in a phrase such as *norma normata semper normanda*.

The reality of this danger is illustrated by the position defended by De Hoest cum suis, namely that synods do not have the jurisdiction to change confessions, (cf. 2.6.2.7) as well De Gier's suggestion that those who seek to change or add to the confessions cast doubt on their own orthodoxy (cf. 2.14.2.10). Both stances are curious in view of the fact that the Canons of Dort were written by a synod.

Although I find the designation norma normata unfortunate, in substance I agree with Schilder when he points out that a confession is more than just norma normanda (2.10.2.6).

The emphasis on the phrase 'the maintenance of their doctrine' in the debate via AR-1816 has probably had more consequences for the Dutch debate than participants in the debate realized. One can say of Scripture that it must be maintained. But the doctrine of the church is, theoretically, always open to emendation. Describing the church's task with respect to its doctrine (teaching) as 'maintaining' sends out a wrong signal. It is the task of the church continually to conform its doctrine (teaching) to Scripture. One of the big problems with the debate on confessional subscription would seem to be the fact that 'confessions' are wrongly connected with the verb 'to maintain'.

3.1.1.3.4.2 The Government of the Church

The debates on the structure of the NHK make clear, among other things, that confessional subscription is interwoven with one's view of the relationship between local churches and the structure such a relationship is given: the supra-local government of the church, as one might say. The debates of the 1950s and 60s in the GKN(v) make clear that the issue is also closely related to one's understanding of individual church membership and the office bearers serving in the church: the local government of the church, as one might say.

In this subsection, a descriptive overview will be given of the variations of polity defended and practised within Dutch Reformed circles in the period covered by this study (3.1.1.3.4.2.1). Next I will look more systematically at the functioning of the offices and the assemblies, particularly as it affects confessional issues, since, in some Reformed circles, it is a very controversial issue

⁷⁰⁰ The future perfect tenses make clear that the initiative lies in heaven: the church is to do what has already been done in heaven.

(3.1.1.3.4.2.2). In closing, I will look at the relationship in The Netherlands between the church and the state (3.1.1.3.4.2.3).

3.1.1.3.4.2.1 Dortian and Hagian Polities

In 1571, the first Dutch Synod held in Emden adopted a church order based on the Gallican church order. Subsequent to Emden, a number of synods revised the church order. GS Dordrecht 1618-19 was the last to do so, and thus Dutch Reformation polity is generally referred to as Dortian polity, and its church order as the Church Order of Dordrecht. After the church schism of 1886, known as the Doleantie (a schism in which church polity played an important role), a form of Dortian polity became known as Doleantie polity or ‘old’ polity; the other form was dubbed ‘new’ polity after the Geelkerken-affair. Both ‘old’ and ‘new’ polity consider themselves to hold to the original Dortian polity.⁷⁰¹

In **Dortian polity**, the local church stands central, with the church council as the key authority; ‘old’ polity would even say ‘only authority’.⁷⁰² This church council comprises the minister(s), elders, and to an extent deacons⁷⁰³ of the church. Local churches exercise sister church relations with other local churches in a system of increasingly wider ties. A group of local churches meet together in a classis. To a classis, held once every three months, each church council delegates two office bearers, usually a minister and an elder.⁷⁰⁴ The churches grouped in various classes, usually within the boundaries of a province, meet in a particular synod,⁷⁰⁵ again by process of delegation.⁷⁰⁶ Such particular synods are held annually. The churches grouped in particular synods meet in the national or general synod, again by a process of delegation.⁷⁰⁷ General synods are as a rule held tri-annually.

With respect to authority and jurisdiction, it should be noted that ‘old’ polity considered the supra-local assemblies to be not ‘higher’ but ‘broader’ assemblies. Moreover, members of broader assemblies are only such by virtue of delegation, not by virtue of office; thus such assemblies are not considered to have ‘official’ authority.⁷⁰⁸ Furthermore, broader assemblies are not permanent bodies but cease to exist as soon as the agenda for the assembly has been completed. The only permanent ruling body in ‘old’ polity is the church council.⁷⁰⁹ ‘New’ polity holds a different

⁷⁰¹ See Golverdingen, *Strijd om het Kerkrecht*, 6.1 and 6.2 for a description of the difference between these two.

⁷⁰² It is disputable whether CO-1619 saw the church council as the ‘highest’ or ‘primary’ authority, see Golverdingen, *Strijd om het Kerkrecht*, 5.5.3.

⁷⁰³ BC art. 30 describes the church council as consisting of pastors, overseers and deacons. CO-1619 art. 37 describes the church council consists of ministers and elders. In The Netherlands Reformed churches have a dual system so that deacons have a limited measure of governing authority; in the Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid Afrika (Reformed Church in South Africa) deacons do not have governing authority.

⁷⁰⁴ On the classis see Van den Broeke, *Geschiedenis van de Classis*.

⁷⁰⁵ The term ‘provincial’ synod is used occasionally, but those present at such a synod came from more than one province (e.g. the provincial synod of Dort, 1574). The entry on *provincie* in *WNT* suggests that the term was used not only for secular purposes but also for ecclesiastical purposes. English speaking Reformed churches with Dutch roots tend to use the term ‘regional synod’. I will stick with ‘particular synod’ since the abbreviation ‘PS’ is commonly used also in English studies.

⁷⁰⁶ The number of delegates per classis depends on the number of classes in a province. Delegated would always be an equal number of elders and ministers.

⁷⁰⁷ One can compare the system in two ways to the (American) Presbyterian system. Geographically the equivalents are church council—session, classis—presbytery, general synod—general assembly. However, when one takes competencies as guideline the church council should be compared with the presbytery.

⁷⁰⁸ Strictly speaking it is possible to delegate a non-ordained person to an ecclesiastical assembly. It still happens at synods that someone is delegated while ‘in office’ but when the general synod meets, is ‘out of office’ because his term has expired. See also Golverdingen, *Strijd om het Kerkrecht*, 5.11.2.

⁷⁰⁹ Thus the terms ‘classis’ and ‘synod’ are employed like the term ‘meeting.’ Strictly speaking local churches do not belong to a classis or synod but to a classical or synodical region.

position. Supra-local assemblies are higher assemblies, its members are so by virtue of office, and the assemblies may sit (more) permanently.

Dortian polity in practice is well illustrated by looking at the matter of confessional subscription. It is the local church that calls a minister or candidate-minister, who is subsequently installed or ordained under the authority of the local church council. However, the churches have agreed to assist each other in this matter. Candidates for the ministry are therefore examined at a classis, and church councils may not suspend or depose ministers without the involvement of neighbouring churches. Because ministers serve not only in the local church but also in other churches through pulpit exchange, a minister subscribes the confessions not only in the local church but also at classis, (thus signing the form of subscription twice). The other office bearers (elders and deacons) subscribe only locally.⁷¹⁰

Although GS Dordrecht 1618-19 had adopted a clearly thought out polity, it was not generally or completely introduced in Dutch regions at that moment. Provincial governments were not keen on losing their grip on the church (former polities had been somewhat more Erastian) and were also afraid of nationalist as opposed to provincialist tendencies.⁷¹¹ Hence after GS Dordrecht 1618-19, no general synods were held in the Dutch and Batavian Republics up until 1816. Although certain aspects of Dortian polity thus were not put into practice, the structure of the church was more or less Dortian throughout the Republic.

Subsequent to the French occupation (1795-1813), the United Netherlands continued as a constitutional monarchy.⁷¹² In order to advance the cause of nationalism over provincialism, the Minister for Religion set in motion the reorganization of the national Reformed church. This resulted in a new national church order, AR-1816 (cf. 2.4.2). Because the general synod was to meet annually in The Hague, this polity might be indicated with the term Hagian polity.

In contrast to Dortian polity, in **Hagian polity** the national church stands central. Hence the structure of assemblies is tiered, and the synod, not the local church council, is the highest authority. Instead of incidental ecclesiastical assemblies consisting of delegates from the minor assemblies, permanent ecclesiastical boards were created consisting of royal appointees. These boards generally continued to bear the old names, and were thus known as the General Synod, Provincial (Church) Board, and Classical (Church) Board. Though the 'old' classes continued to exist in the form of 'classical associations', their status had been reduced to that of regulative-executive and, on occasion, advisory bodies. In addition, 'rings' were formed, a circle of ministers living in close vicinity to each other who would ensure pulpit supply for churches without their own minister, and would meet for brotherly edification.⁷¹³

The provincial boards were given the task of examining candidates for the ministry. With the focus having moved from the local church to the national church, subscription for ministers became a matter of the provincial boards alone (and then only those who had a theological university in their region). Subscription for elders and deacons fell into disuse, and subscription for religious instructors was regulated by the body appointing the instructor.

⁷¹⁰ CO-1619 prescribed subscription at the classis; leaving subscription for local officebearers in the hands of the local churches or the classes. See further 3.4.7.7.

⁷¹¹ After having gained independence from Spain, the Dutch Republic formed a federation of independent provinces, duchies and counties.

⁷¹² This process, which also meant a change from the federation of provinces from before 1795, was not completed in one step. Under the first constitution the king still had many powers, under the new constitution of 1848 more powers were given to the ministerial cabinet. See Bornewasser, "Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden 1815-1830", 228-250 and Boogman, "1848 en haar nasleep", 333-352 (in *AGN*, volumes 11 and 122 respectively).

⁷¹³ For the *Algemeen Reglement* see Hooijer, *Kerkelijke Wetten*, the text of AR-1816 can be accessed via www.kerkrecht.nl.—The practice of 'rings' was in fact older than 1816 but had not been officially regulated by Dort. In some regions the 'ring' was referred to as 'coetus'.

What I have sketched above and designated Dortian and Hagian polities are in fact the Dutch versions of presbyterial-synodical and collegial polity. However, it would be wrong to assume that it was or is a case of either Dortian or Hagian in The Netherlands. Historical circumstances introduced all sorts of variations on these two polities. With respect to Hagian polity, I note the following more prominent versions: AR-1816, the more democratic AR-1852, the 'Dortianization' of Hagian polity with CO-1951, the *Werkorde* of the SoW, and CO-2004 of the PKN. With respect to Dortian polity, each of the independent associations of Reformed churches formed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has its own version. The most traditional of these associations of churches have left the Church Order of Dordrecht intact (GG, GGNNA, OGG), whereas others have adapted it more or less to the times (CGKN, GKN[s], GKN(v)). In the NGK, which originally chose a more congregationalist approach, there seems now to be a tendency towards a more presbyterial-synodical approach.

Thus Dutch Reformed churches today practise three types of church polity: more collegial, presbyterial and more congregationalist,⁷¹⁴ the latter being of a more recent date.

3.1.1.3.4.2.2 The Offices and the Assemblies

Orthodox Reformed church polity is commonly described as presbyterial-synodical.⁷¹⁵ The two terms indicate the two focal points of this polity: the functioning of the office bearers and the functioning of the assemblies. This polity sets itself against congregationalism, in which individual churches and individual members are the focal point, and also against collegialism, in which the supra-local office bearers and assemblies are the focal point. Congregationalism tends towards democratism, collegialism towards oligarchism.

Both democratism and oligarchism have a tendency to horizontalize the government of the church, of making it an issue of people. In contrast, the Reformed, especially in the wake of Calvin and Bucer, emphasized the Christocratic character of the government of the Church, requiring a balance between the activity of the congregation and the offices in the process of a person becoming an office-bearer. This point was so important for the churches of the Reformation that it was emphatically included in its confessional statements (e.g. BC art. 30-32).

The Christocratic character of the church is visible in the congregation through its presbyters, its ruling elders. The office bearers of the church are considered to be Christ's representatives (Luke 10:16; 2 Cor. 5:20) who rule in the midst (not over) the congregation. They co-operate by means of a common council already in existence in the earliest Christian church (1 Tim. 4:14; cf. Phil. 1:1). Though it is the task of the congregation as a whole to hold fast the doctrine of Christ, the office bearers in particular are responsible for this matter (2 Tim. 2:2).

During the second half of the twentieth century there was discussion within the NHK on the nature of office in the church. It resulted in a study report written by prof. H. Berkhof and critiqued by a number of men appointed to do so by the general synod. One of the points of debate was whether the office finds its primary authority in the congregation and is a 'professionalization' of the priesthood of all believers or is to be derived more directly from Christ. Berkhof displayed a tendency to 'socialize' the office while others—among them A. A. van Ruler—tended towards a more magisterial position.⁷¹⁶

Though orthodox Reformed polity is described as presbyterial-synodical, nevertheless continental Reformed polity and Presbyterian polity are not exactly each other's equivalents. A branch of the Dutch Reformed, found especially with the *Dolerenden*, the GKN(v), the NGK (i.e. defenders of 'old' polity) and to a large extent with the CGKN, tends towards what I will refer to as 'autonomism'. Presbyterians hold in their polity to what is referred to as connectionalism.⁷¹⁷

⁷¹⁴ I emphasize the adjective 'more'. It would go too far to simply equate the polity of the SoW with that of, for example, the Anglican Church and that of the NGK with that of, for example, a bond of charismatic churches.

⁷¹⁵ Van 't Spijker, "Presbyteriaal-synodaal", 326-337; Van Genderen and Velema, *BGD*, 661-665.

⁷¹⁶ See NHK and Berkhof, *Ambt*?

⁷¹⁷ See Reymond, "Presbyterian Church Government", 95-116; Graham, "Presbytery", 44.

The point on which autonomism and connectionalism differ from each other is the nature of the relationship between local churches or, more specifically, the nature and authority of broader assemblies.

Autonomism argues that only the local church is a church proper. Veenhof writes: “the instituted church exists only locally.” It means that the local ecclesiastical assembly, the church council, is the only administration. The other assemblies have their power only by way of agreement and delegation. Strictly speaking, these assemblies are not assemblies of persons but of churches, and thus not of ‘office bearers’ but of ‘delegates’ or ‘commissioners’. These other assemblies are therefore referred to as ‘broader assemblies’ or ‘major assemblies’ and not ‘higher assemblies’. They are also referred to as ‘assemblies’ and not ‘courts’, for they do not have jurisdiction, for example, to exercise discipline. One might phrase it thus: of all the ecclesiastical assemblies, only the church council has *jus divinum positivum*.⁷¹⁸ Within those practising autonomism, one may discern a less and a more radical version: that of the GKN(v) and that of the NGK. The NGK practise a radical autonomism that almost approaches congregationalism. The GKN(v) hold that unity in the faith make confessional and organizational unity necessary.⁷¹⁹ It is interesting to note that the Belgic Confession specifies the offices of the church, but not the assemblies in the church. In CO-1619, assemblies are limited in their jurisdiction to those matters that have been delegated by common accord to their jurisdiction, and the authority of the broader assemblies is considered by defenders of ‘old’ polity to be different in character from that of consistories (articles 30 and 36).

A. Kuyper, F. L. Rutgers, and the lawyer-politician A. F. De Savornin Lohman (the first three professors at the Free University), and in their wake many Reformed of the twentieth century,⁷²⁰ considered the association of churches to be strictly an association of autonomous local churches. The covenant that binds these churches, the accord of association, was often considered to be the confessions (cf. 2.10.2.3). Hofstede de Groot argued that the constitution of the churches should be considered to be the church order rather than the confessions (cf. 2.6.2.4). However, the question should have been whether terms such as ‘constitution’ and ‘accord’ can be used in the context of an organic organization such as the church. It would seem to me that contractarian notions played an influential role in the reorganization of the Calvinist churches. This mirrored what was then taking place in the civil spheres, and it is worth noting that both Kuyper and De Savornin Lohman were influential politicians.

Connectionalism holds that the instituted church can exist both locally and regionally. Graham writes: “There is a body understood as a regional church” and “the presbytery is the overseeing body of the regional church.” Not only the session but the presbytery also has *jus divinum positivum*. Members of all ecclesiastical assemblies are such as ‘office bearers’. Hence Presbyterians refer to their ‘broader assemblies’ as ‘higher assemblies’ and as ‘graded courts’. As higher courts with *jus divinum positivum*, these assemblies may exercise discipline.⁷²¹ Within those practising connectionalism one may discern a less and a more radical version: one might refer to them as the American approach and the Scottish approach. The American approach sees

⁷¹⁸ Golverdingen’s description of the debate on ‘old’ and ‘new’ polity does not make clear whether the issue was (1) the power of the church council and classis on the one hand and the synods on the other hand, or (2) the power of the church council on the one hand and the broader assemblies on the other hand. It would seem from his description this was not clear during the conflict either. Thus an early debate (Rutgers-Kleyn) was (2), the debate Kuyper/Bouwman-Van Lonkhuyzen/Greijdanus was (1). (Golverdingen, *Strijd om het Kerkrecht*, chapters 3 and 5).

⁷¹⁹ See De Jong, *Bound Yet Free*. This volume contains five essays. The first has its roots in the Doleantie, the second through fourth in the Geelkerken affair and the Liberation (though it should be noted that the third contains so many quotes from A. Kuyper, it may also be seen as a commentary on the Doleantie), and the fifth from the 1960s in the GKN(v). The first four essays focus, among other things, on the autonomy of the local church, the fifth on the calling and duty for local churches to associate in an association of churches.—The quote from Veenhof is from page 184.—See also Deddens, “Een Bond van Kerken”; Van den Broeke, *Geschiedenis van de Classis*, 217-234.

⁷²⁰ See Golverdingen, *Strijd om het Kerkrecht*, chapter 4, for literature.

⁷²¹ Reymond, “Presbyterian Church Government”; Graham, “Presbytery”.

the presbytery as the primary ecclesiastical assembly, whereas the Scottish approach accords more authority to the general assembly.⁷²² In comparison with the Dutch confessional tradition, the Westminster Confession of Faith speaks not only of the offices in the church but also of the assemblies of the church, and the Book of Discipline indicates that the jurisdiction of all assemblies is by *jus divinum positivum*.

In short, autonomism holds that local churches are autonomous, that they associate only on the basis of federative agreements, and of all ecclesiastical assemblies only the church council has *jus divinum positivum*. Connectionalism holds that the church exists both locally and regionally, that local churches are organically united in Christ, and that all ecclesiastical assemblies have *jus divinum positivum*.

It would seem, however, that in practice the difference between the positions hardly affects the ultimate authority of the assemblies. Those who vest the authority of major assemblies in the letters of commission, the continental Reformed, trust that the decisions of major assemblies will be implemented: in most continental Reformed churches general synod decisions are considered binding as soon as they are taken. Those who consider the assemblies official, the Presbyterians, recognize the need for the churches to be well represented: in most Presbyterian churches, general assemblies need to be approved by a majority of presbyteries (under the so-called Banner Act).

*This is not the place to argue the ins and outs of autonomism and connectionalism. The Reformed worldwide would do well to reconsider the polity of the churches to see if the Dortian Reformed and Westminster Presbyterian systems of church government can be synthesized.*⁷²³

The doctrine of connectionalism and autonomism played an important role in the distinction between the GKN[s] and the GKN(v). Ever since the Geelkerken case (2.10.2.2.4), there had been a serious debate between advocates of ‘new’ polity (connectionalism) and ‘old’ polity (autonomism). The GKN[s] took a more connectionalist approach⁷²⁴ and the GKN(v) a more autonomist approach. As a result, in GKN(v) circles, autonomism is defended almost as if it concerned a point of confessional order.⁷²⁵

However, the difference between the two does make itself felt. The critical question is whether a broader or higher assembly can exercise doctrinal discipline. Within the autonomist scheme, the most a broader assembly can do when a church council refuses to ratify a decision of confessional unfaithfulness and follow it up with disciplinary actions, is to declare the church council (and the local church) in breach of the church order and thus outside the association (opinions differ on the extent to which a broader assembly may become involved in the local affairs of the church). Within the connectionalist scheme, a broader assembly is able to discipline those guilty of confessional unfaithfulness and rescue the local church.

*The debates that raged during the 1960s within the GKN(v) (2.14.2.1) evidence how intertwined the issues of confessional subscription and church polity are. Vonk and Doornbos considered the church to be the congregation with its consistory, Kamphuis, Wiskerke and Schilder included also the broader assemblies of the church. The debate between Kamphuis and Goossens on whether the form of subscription read (should read) “consistory, classis, **and** synod” or “consistory, classis, **or** synod” also touches this very point. The NGK, as strict advocates of autonomism, have for a long time argued that the association of churches cannot even be officially involved in enforcing of*

⁷²² See Reymond, "Presbyterian Church Government", 124-125. In these pages Reymond also interacts briefly with the autonomist position of Dortian polity.

⁷²³ With respect to a comparison with Presbyterian polity I have done some study myself: Janssen, *Vergadering*; Janssen, *Presbyterianisme*. Other relevant studies are various works by D. Deddens, and further Golverdingen, *Strijd om het Kerkrecht* and Van den Broeke, *Geschiedenis van de Classis*.

⁷²⁴ As is evidenced by CO-1957 (GKN[s]) article 41.1: “Every major assembly consists of office bearers, delegated by the minor assemblies that assemble in it.”

⁷²⁵ This in the wake of A. Kuyper (Deddens, "Presbyterianisme": 158-160). In 1998 I was asked to critique a paper written by a GKN(v) missionary on this issue. It concluded that the two polities differed ‘in principle’ (which, in Dutch Reformed terms, is saying that they are confessionally mutually exclusive). De Graaf, *Investigation*.

a confessional nature. This changed somewhat in 2004 when AKS art. 17 stated that in cases of doctrinal discipline the churches are accountable to their sister churches.

I myself have become convinced that there is more merit to connectionalism than is commonly thought in GKN(v) circles (see further 3.4.8.4).

The government of the church is to be characterized as spiritual because Christ rules the church by Word and Spirit. The work of those who labour in the church is described in Scripture as διακονία (ministry). However, not every ministry carries with it the governing authority of the office. While office bearers arise out of the congregation and assemblies are formed by local churches, the authority of office bearers and assemblies is from above. The authority of the office and of the assembly is the authority of Christ.

Because both office bearers and assemblies serve Christ and the church, it is proper that they be bound both to Christ and to the church in their service. They are bound to Christ in their acceptance of the obligation to teach only what Christ taught. They are bound to the church in their acceptance of the obligation to teach only what the church teaches. Since the church is constantly conforming its teaching to Christ's teaching, and this teaching is articulated in the confessional statements of the church, subscribing to confessions is both binding to Christ and binding to the church.

3.1.1.3.4.2.3 Church and State

Reformed church government distinguishes itself from Lutheran and Zwinglian church government when it comes to its relationship to the state. The Lutheran and Zwinglian traditions were shaped in the wake of the ideas of T. Erastus, and found support among the Remonstrants in The Netherlands and Episcopalians in England. The segregation of church and state was not so much an anticipation of the democratic movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but has its origins in the political and religious situation of the sixteenth century. However, it was a conviction that could not be put into practice until free churches had come into existence in The Netherlands.⁷²⁶

The segregation of church and state brings with it the conviction that the state does not have the right to enforce subscription to a particular confession of faith.

During the first two centuries of the Dutch Reformed church, the State interfered in the affairs of the church by enforcing subscription to the Three Forms of Unity via laws. From this perspective, the steps taken in 1816 and 1848, removing the church from the sphere of direct state influence, are to be approved.

3.1.1.3.4.2.4 Summary

In this subsection I have described the two most common polities practised in Dutch Reformed churches, the role of offices and assemblies in the church, and the relationship between church and state. One may distinguish between Dortian and Hagian polities in the course of Dutch Reformed church history. Today, the polities practised by Dutch churches with their roots in the Calvinist reformation can be characterized as either tending towards collegial, presbyterial-synodical, or tending towards congregationalist.

On the doctrine of the offices, there is unity among the Dutch Reformed. Office bearers are the direct representatives of Christ. With respect to assemblies, there are varying stances. In the Dutch Reformed tradition, both autonomism and connectionalism have been defended. Because this distinction leads to varying understandings of the authority of ecclesiastical assemblies, it has consequences for the exercise of doctrinal discipline. I believe that in both the offices and the assemblies it should be clear that the authority of Christ is being exercised.

Finally, in The Netherlands, church and state are separated from each other, so that the state has no right to become involved in confessional affairs.

⁷²⁶ See Speelman, *Calvijn en de zelfstandigheid van de kerk*.

3.1.1.3.5. The Goal and Ministry of the Church

To what end does the church exist? Does ‘confessing’ belong to this goal? If one wants a detailed answer, much can be said.⁷²⁷

From the perspective of a vertical ecclesiology (God institutes the church), the question amounts to: why has God instituted a church? The answer is clear from Scripture. The church is first and foremost the humanity that praises and serves God (Eph. 3:21). It is further the pillar and bulwark of the truth: it proclaims and preserves the divine Word (1 Tim. 3:15), it is the community in which and from which believers practise their faith (Gal. 6:10; James 5:13-16). The ministries of the church—worship, outreach, diaconate, catechetical instruction, etc.—are aimed towards fulfilling this end. These ministries boil down to three tasks: the church is to worship God, to proclaim His Name, and to form a community of persons dedicated to God’s service. Confessing plays an important role in all these ministries.

From the perspective of a horizontal ecclesiology (the church is formed of men) the question amounts to: why do believers associate in a church? Likeminded persons can assist each other in achieving a common goal and prevent each other from deviating from that goal. As an English proverb has it: birds of a feather flock together. Church members will thus have an inner urge to identify themselves. Confessional statements tend to serve as the boundary markers for the group.

The question must be asked, however, to what extent this sociological approach can be determinative for the church. The church does not begin with a group of likeminded people but is a society of people that is to become likeminded (Philippians 2:2). Churches sometimes have a tendency to identify themselves by a particular ministry at the expense of others (e.g. Salvation Army and diaconate, the NHK and apostolate, the GKN and doctrinal perfectionism). Confessions are used to state these priorities, or are sidelined because they obstruct such ministries. The result is a form of denominationalism that undermines the organic character and unity of the church. Both Haitjema (2.10.2.3) and Van Ruler (2.11.2.5) (the latter studied under the former) were of the opinion that the confession is not the starting point for the church but its goal. For Haitjema, it meant that the church first had to be restructured, and then could focus on confessing. Van Ruler was of the opinion that outreach (apostolate) has priority over confessing. I consider these to be false dilemmas. The church takes its starting point in Christ, in His teachings (doctrine). In bearing these out (confessing them), the church grows in understanding and comes to a more in-depth confessing. As such, there is a circle from confessing to confessing. Visible here is how the church becomes what it is. One may say in response to Haitjema: the way the church is organized is itself a confession. In response to Van Ruler one may say: reaching out is itself confessing, without confession one cannot reach out.

3.1.1.3.6 Summary and Conclusion

In the course of time, ecclesiological presuppositions have strongly influenced the positions taken with respect to confessions and subscription to them. If an ecclesiology is not drawn from Scripture, one’s stance on confessions is likely to be untrue to Scripture as well. Distinguishing between the church and the congregation, and subsequently positing that confessional unity is proper for the congregation but not necessary for the church, is an example of a line of reasoning untrue to Scripture. A study of the essence of the church has made clear how closely intertwined ecclesiology and the functioning of confessions are. In coming to an understanding how confessions can work, one needs to take into account all aspects that pertain to the essence of the church. The organization of the church both locally and regionally also impacts on the functioning of confessions in the church. Even leaving aside for the moment the fact that confessing is necessary for the church, it is clear that having confessions and enforcing subscription to them suits the structures of the church well. At the same time confessions are helpful tools in fulfilling the ministries in the church to the end of achieving its goal.

⁷²⁷ See the various essays in Van 't Spijker and others, *De kerk*, 391-504.

I conclude that a proper biblical ecclesiology is a *sine qua non* for a proper, biblical understanding of confessions and subscription to them. Many trains of thought on confessions and subscription to them have derailed at the points of ecclesiology.

3.1.1.4 SUMMARY

In the foregoing, I have looked at the dogmatic fields of revelation, anthropology (soteriology) and ecclesiology to explain how choices made in these fields influence one's view of confessional writings and subscription to them. The stances held in relation to divine revelation as the source of human confessing, man as the agent of confessing, and the church as the sphere in which confessing takes place are determinative for the position held on confessing. I believe that in the past insufficient explicit attention has been paid to this fact. As a result, many debates on the propriety of confessions and subscription to them have tended to be superficial and 'too quick.' I will further work out the repercussions of my dogmatic choices in the chapters ahead.

3.1.2 PHILOSOPHICAL ASPECTS

Strictly speaking, the issue of confessions and subscription to them is broader than the field of theology, and this is one of its problems.

Confessions articulate faith-convictions and thus make use of language. There are, therefore, semantic aspects to this issue. Questions are asked such as: To what extent is human language able to reflect divine truths and divine revelation? Is it reasonable to expect a church to hold on to a particular confessional document for centuries on end?

Further, many of the theological schools of the nineteenth century were the fruit of the Enlightenment or reaction to it. Modernists denied the possibility of knowledge of the divine because it was beyond the verification of scientific endeavour. I have alleged on several occasions during the historical review that this betrays a Kantian epistemology. The questions posed by Modernists shaped the responses given by other parties. Well into the twentieth century, the debate between faith and science had repercussions for the functioning of confessions. Is it necessary to justify faith convictions in order to consider them binding? Even more basic is the question: is it possible to justify faith convictions? At the root, these are not theological but epistemological issues.

Questions such as the foregoing—and there are probably more that could be posed—make clear that an excursion into the discipline of philosophy is required, even if only to judge what role epistemological factors should play in the debate. I will look at the two fields within this discipline that, I believe, have the most direct impact on this study. These are the fields of philosophy of language (or semantics) (3.1.2.1) and epistemology (3.1.2.2).

On this point, the character of my study is not an in-depth one. I am a theologian who have dabbled in philosophy, no more.⁷²⁸ Hence I will rely heavily on secondary sources in my understanding of the issues. The first is the third edition of the general introduction to the philosophical analysis of concepts written by Vincent Brümmer, professor in religious philosophy at the University of Utrecht between 1967 and 1997.⁷²⁹ With respect to the field of semantics, his introductory study seems to be quite general. With respect to the field of epistemology, he outlines ideas that seem to be more his own. In order to balance this out, I will also review some ideas of

⁷²⁸ Plantinga writes concerning theologians who take epistemological positions without developing the point in detail: "Perhaps [those theologians] think (quite properly) that that is the job of philosophers." (Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 5). I agree with the "quite properly" but do believe that theologians should be more explicit in explaining their stance in epistemology. My own 'dabbling in philosophy' consists of undergraduate courses taken for my Bachelor of Arts and a history of philosophy course taken for my Masters of Divinity.

⁷²⁹ Vincent Brümmer is also known on account of having founded the Utrechtian School, a direction in theology not unlike that of the Apologists.

the American philosopher Alvin Plantinga, whose ideas are becoming increasingly popular in the Dutch Reformed world.⁷³⁰

3.1.2.1 SEMANTICS, OR PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

There are three issues within the field of semantics that have drawn my attention as possibly being relevant for my study. First of all, there is the understanding of how statements are classified, and into what categories confessional statements fall (3.1.2.1.1). Then there is the issue of concept analysis, and how language conveys and shapes our understanding of concepts; this impacts on how one looks at the articulation of faith articles (3.1.2.1.2). Finally, attention needs to be paid to the changing character of language, meaning that the petrified text of confessional documents can in fact change in meaning over time (3.1.2.1.3).

3.1.2.1.1 *Classifications of Statements*

A confession is, by definition, an utterance. While speaking and writing is a daily activity for human beings and thus might be considered natural to them, since the earliest Greek philosophers, study has been made of the precise workings of language. In their reflection, writes Brümmer, philosophers have identified pitfalls in areas of interpretation, and have enabled us to say more clearly what it is that needs to be said, and understand more clearly that which has been said.

Following J. L. Austin, the acts below are distinguished with regard to any articulated statement:

1. the *locutionary* act, the act of speaking
2. the *illocutionary* act, the expressed statement is a request for action
3. the *perlocutionary* act, the expressed statement is reacted to

Thus when in a draughty room I say, 'the door is open', saying 'the door is open' is the locutionary act, implying 'close the door' is the illocutionary act, and getting up and shutting the door is the perlocutionary act.

This distinction makes clear that the meaning of a statement lies not in what is said (locution) but in its goal (illocution).

This has consequences for the understanding of confessional statements. A confessional statement such as 'Jesus was born of the virgin Mary' wants to do more than express how Jesus was born (cf. HC LD 14).

Building upon Austin's classification of statements, Brümmer develops a model for understanding the workings of the illocutions of statements. He identifies four types of statements:

Constative: a proposition concerning a fact, opinion, or conviction. A constative is either true or false. For example, 'Yesterday I ate a banana.' 'God created everything.'

Expressive: a personal proposition concerning a fact, opinion, or conviction. An expressive is either honest or dishonest. For example, 'I think I ate a banana yesterday.' 'I believe that God created everything.'

Commissive: a proposition indicating the existence of a commitment or promise. A commissive is either maintained or transgressed. For example, 'I promise to eat a banana', 'I place my trust in God, my Creator.'

Prescriptive: a proposition seeking a commitment from the hearer. 'Eat a banana!' 'Entrust yourself to the God who created you!'

Brümmer points out that this classification does not imply mutual exclusivity. A statement generally contains more than one of these aspects. The illocution that dominates determines its classification. Brümmer illustrates how these elements work together with the first article of the Apostles' Creed "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth." The dominant illocution is an expression of trust, and thus it is an expressive. For this illocution to work, there are two constatives at work: (1) God exists, and (2) God is trustworthy. Furthermore, since this statement is uttered in a Christian context, it is a commissive: the speaker commits

⁷³⁰ Brümmer, *Wijzgerige Begripsanalyse*; Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*.

himself to continued trust in God. Finally, since the statement takes the form of a confession of faith, it is a proclamation of faith and thus a prescriptive for others to place their trust in God also.

During the course of his explanation, Brümmer remarks, "For this reason it is absurd to say that religious faith is an attitude of trust and not concerned with 'considering true certain postulations!'"⁷³¹ This 'absurdity' is precisely what Groningers during the nineteenth and Liberals during the twentieth century suggested.

Applying this to confessions, I can concur with Brümmer that confessional statements tend to be expressions of all four types. Reflecting on this further, I would, however, hesitate to consider confessional statements *primarily* expressives. I consider it sufficient to note that confessional statements can serve simultaneously as constatives, expressives, commissives, and prescriptives. Where the emphasis lies does not so much depend on the abstract statement, but the context in which it is uttered. The Apostles' Creed uttered during a worship service is doxological, and thus the expressive character dominates. The same Creed functioning as the 'text' for a sermon is constative and prescriptive. The same Creed in the context of the Reformed tradition surrounding public profession of faith and baptism is expressive and commissive.

Hence I take issue with Hofstede de Groot's suggestions that the Catechism, as a teaching aid, cannot serve as a confessional document (2.5.2.5 & 2.6.2.4). It is not the document itself that determines its function, but its context. Though, of course, the document may be drawn up with a particular context in mind and thus be considered to function primarily in that context.

3.1.2.1.2 Concept Analysis

Brümmer next discusses the task of philosophy as analysis of concepts. This notion is relevant to this study since Brümmer also considers systematic theology or dogmatics to be a form of concept analysis. To make his point, Brümmer first looks at the workings of language. There exist two models for the workings of language: the reference model and the utility model. The reference model sees words as symbols that refer to existing entities, whereas the utility model sees words as instruments to convey a concept. Brümmer adopts the utility model for language and, in the wake of Gilbert Ryle, distinguishes between speaking (the act of articulating) and language (the store of vocabulary, grammar, intonation etc.). Language is the vehicle for speaking. Following the thoughts of Peter Geach, Brümmer considers the object of speaking to be concepts. These concepts he describes as mental capacities as opposed to physical capacities. These capacities are not inherent but learned, and one never stops learning. Concepts are formed through a process of ordering and classification. Since a person only needs to articulate those concepts that are part of his life experience, a person's language is limited. Foreign concepts are approximated by the language in use and in this process language can shape the concept. A comparison of languages makes clear that social, cultural, and physical environments play an import role in determining our concepts.

Thus an Inuit Indian (Eskimo) may identify many types of snow, while a tropical Indian may have no word for snow; and thus a monogamous society may understand the word 'mother' differently from a polygamous society.

Brümmer points out that the primary task of philosophy is to analyse concepts. This it does in three ways:

1. Critical reflection on our conceptual skills, a skill we intuitively practice and control, in order to distinguish clearly the various concepts that we practise in our thinking, and to track down the systematic relations between them
2. This activity will set down the whole complex of conceptual skills, which is embedded in our life form, describing it, systematically improving it, and testing it with respect to its cultural relevance.
3. To the extent to which it determines our thought-patterns, the whole cultural process is critically assessed. This gives us insight into our own ways of thinking and

⁷³¹ Brümmer, *Wijsgerige Begripsanalyse*, 39.

conceptualizing in their actual form and cultural limitations, making us aware of possible mis-steps in exercising our conceptual skills. This enables us to bring thought-problems or conceptual dilemmas that result from these mis-steps to a solution.

The relevance of this to my study can be seen in the following remark of Brümmer, “Systematic theology is itself a form of concept-analysis ... since the types of questions with which systematic theology is concerned are questions concerning concepts.”⁷³² I would not agree that systematic theology is no more than a form of concept-analysis. However, concept-analysis is an essential side to this theological endeavour. Since confessions are an articulation of the doctrine of the church, and the formulation of such doctrine is one of the tasks of systematic theology, correctly understanding the workings of a confessional document requires an understanding of how concepts are brought to articulation. That language can shape the way we understand concepts cautions us against elevating confessional statements to a level of everlasting incorrigibility. Should it not be a task of symbolics to concern itself, among other things, with the analysis of concepts found in confessions?

Thus, from a semantic point of view, a dated document can never be immediately clear. One will always need to re-translate a document into the existing linguistic framework. If it is considered necessary for confessional documents to be immediately clear and relevant, updating them is, from a semantic point of view, a *sine qua non*.

At this point, it is also important to factor in man’s capabilities as a sinful creature in relation to divine matters. Are we able to know divine realities in their essence and totality? Is our language able to convey divine realities? To convey the being of God, the term ‘trinity’ came into use; nevertheless, the ‘trinity’ remains a mystery (cf. Athanasian Creed). It is one thing for a tropical Indian not to understand snow, it was quite another for a sinful human being not to understand the being of God. This ought to make man humble in his confessional endeavour. We will therefore always be refining and reformulating our understanding of what is divinely revealed to us.

On the other hand, it should be said that the substance of man’s confessing surpasses all linguistic boundaries. The work of the Holy Spirit in the church and in individuals allows them to communicate divinely revealed truths across centuries and cultural boundaries. Another reason for refining and reformulating our understanding of what is divinely revealed to us is the cultural and temporal context in which we find ourselves.

3.1.2.1.3 The Changing Character of Language

I return to Brümmer. Having come to understand that “the act of every expression comprises the exercise of a complex set of conceptual skills”, and that “every word in the sentence with which the expression is made, serves as an instrument to exercise one of these conceptual skills”, he sets out to explain how this has consequences for how one understands the meaning of expressions and words. He makes clear that the context determines not only the illocution of an expression but also the meaning of a word in the conceptual skill it is used for, and thus its contribution to the meaning of the expression as a whole. In short, context plays an important role in the functioning of language. Language is not a given but based on convention. Conventions in turn depend on acceptance by people. As a result, languages live, and words can change meaning.

Brümmer’s thoughts have important consequences for the hermeneutics of confessions, since confessional documents tend to be historic documents. Thus they should be read in the light of their original context. However, confessional documents are appropriated to say something in the present. Thus they should be read in the light of their present context. If the original and present contexts are not identical, a confession can in fact mean two things at the same time, and be, by definition, ambiguous.

⁷³² Brümmer, *Wijsgerige Begripsanalyse*, 77,78.

Thus the encouragement given by the foreigners at GS Dordrecht 1618-19 to hold fast the decisions until Christ should come can only refer to the illocution of the Canons, not their locution. Which means that those who do not wish to edit the Canons of Dort (e.g. De Gier, 2.14.2.10) do not do justice to the encouragement given by the foreigners.

The view one has of language clearly influences the way one sees a confession. The philosophy of language can assist us in understanding how confessions work, and may help identify the source of problems with respect to confessions. A few have been noted in the foregoing text, and more will be noted as the problems are systematically discussed.

3.1.2.1.4 Summary

In summary, statements imply a locutionary act, an illocutionary act, and a perlocutionary act, where the illocutionary determines the meaning of a statement (and not, as is commonly thought, the locutionary act). Statements can fulfil a constative, expressive, commissive, or prescriptive function, and, depending on the context, more than one of these at any given moment. Working with the utility model of language, the primary task of philosophy (and systematic theology or symbolics) is to analyse the concepts we use to formulate statements. Since confessions consist formally of statements, these aspects need to be considered when reflecting on the functioning of confessions and confessional subscription.

3.1.2.2 EPISTEMOLOGY

Confessions are utterances of faith and faith is defined by a widely accepted confession as ‘sure knowledge and firm confidence’ (HC LD 7). Moreover, knowledge is frequently defined as a ‘justified true belief’. This gives the impression that the direct object of the verb ‘to confess’, ‘faith’, is somehow related to knowledge. The question is, how are these two related? This matter is vital to the functioning of confessions, especially subscription to them, for the binding authority of confessions is often considered to be related to the certainty of its postulations. If what a confession sets forth is doubtful or unverifiable, it cannot be considered binding, argue Groningers, Modernists and many leading figures in the PKN today. Further, if that set forth by a confession is considered certain and therefore ‘knowledge’, is it still an article of *faith*? These are the types of questions I am exploring in what follows.

Within the discipline of philosophy, the field of epistemology concerns itself with clarifying and defining knowledge and the process of knowing. Hence these questions take us to the discipline of epistemology.

3.1.2.2.1 The Relationship between Knowledge and Faith

Since the days of the Greek philosophers, knowledge has been defined as a justified true belief. This, Brümmer notes, implies that knowledge is faith plus something extra. One can claim ‘to know something’ if one believes it (is convinced of it), is justified in believing this (has rational acceptable grounds for believing it) and is correct in believing it (the object is true, reality).

It is primarily the matter of ‘justification’ that impacts on the confessional issue. Scepticism with respect to human knowledge of the divine has become especially prominent since Kant. The question posed is: if knowledge is a ‘justified true belief’, when and how is a belief that relates to reality (‘truth’) sufficiently ‘justified’ to be considered ‘knowledge’? This is an important question, since subscription to confessions is generally undermined by pointing out that confessions contain ‘faith articles’, not ‘knowledge statements’. It is then argued that, because the substance of confessions cannot be justified, it is at odds with freedom of thought to make them binding.

According to Plantinga, the problem is a mistaken problem. He considers Christian belief easily justified, even ‘obviously’ so because many Christians believe, fully conscious of what they are doing, and thus acting responsibly. Christians may be mistaken, deluded, or foolish, but they are not ‘unjustified’. But that, argues Plantinga, is not really the issue either. The focus is not on the justification of Christian belief but on the warrant for Christian belief. Plantinga defines thus:

Systematic Part

a belief has warrant for a person S only if that belief is produced in S by cognitive faculties functioning properly (subject to no dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for S's kind of cognitive faculties, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth.⁷³³

If I understand Plantinga correctly, the term 'justified' looks at the substance of belief, while the term 'warrant' looks at the act of believing. Plantinga goes on to argue that the basic warrant is a sense of the divine.

Brümmer explains how the justification of statements has been researched and thought out by rationalism. Rationalism would only accept *a priori* judgments, self-evident statements, and immediate perception and introspection. Only that can be called knowledge which consists of these statements, perceptions, and all that is rationally built on them. This approach has become known as *evidentialism*. The problem with such rationalism is that in its strictest form it leads to scepticism. Brümmer notes that in order to escape the sceptic conclusion, rationalists have had to loosen up their criteria for justification. In more modern approaches, the concept *absolute certainty* is then replaced with *reasonableness*. However, the argument remains circular, for one needs to define what is probable or reasonable.

According to Brümmer, the problem is in fact a false problem: beliefs by definition cannot be justified, whether to the point of absolute certainty or reasonableness. One can only justify actions, he notes, while believing is not an action but a state of mind. He explains: we do not *decide* to be convinced but *are* convinced by the grounds, just as we don't *decide* to fall in love but *fall in love* due to the circumstances. However, while a 'belief' itself might not be justifiable, Brümmer notes that the grounds for believing something are 'justifiable'. One acts as a rational being when, while believing that p, one accepts that, given a different set of grounds, one might well deny p and believe q.

In short, Plantinga argues that the focus should not be on justification of but warrant for the belief. Brümmer argues that beliefs cannot be justified because believing is not an action but a state of mind.

The effect of strict rationalism is visible in the passing on of Supernaturalism into Modernism, the passage from Heringa Ezn. (2.5.2.7) through Donker Curtius (2.5.2.11) to Scholten (2.7.2.6). Heringa argued traditional Calvinist postulations along the rationalist approach. Donker Curtius, in reflecting on this method, indicated that this approach in fact negated the traditional Calvinist postulations. In his dogmatics, Scholten made clear what was left of traditional Calvinist convictions in the rationalist approach.

With respect to the role of rationalism in the church, Doedes' criticism of Muurling (2.8.2.10) is worth taking note of. He pointed out that the Modernist position, when taken to the extreme, would rob the church of its confession. In his days as a Groninger, Muurling had already proven to be of this mind: in 1851 he had attempted to remove the words 'maintenance of doctrine' from the AR. This stood in sharp contrast with Scholten, who argued that the church should have a confession, and Pierson, who left the church because he could no longer square his convictions with what the church stood for.

If the traditional rationalist approach is in error, how then should 'faith' be related to 'knowledge' so that faith articles may be considered authoritative and therefore binding?

With respect to this question, Plantinga writes,

Christian belief is *immediate*; it is formed in the *basic* way. It doesn't proceed by way of an argument from, for example, the reliability of Scripture or the church. ... the beliefs can have warrant, enough warrant for knowledge, when they are accepted in that basic way.⁷³⁴

Scripture is self-authenticating, and this, according to Plantinga, is a self-evident fact. And thus for the believer, the great things of the gospel are clearly true, obvious, compelling. Therefore belief classifies as knowledge.

⁷³³ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 156.

⁷³⁴ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 259.

With respect to the same question, Brümmer has a more complicated response. He explains first that the verbs ‘know’ and ‘believe’ have different connotations when used in the present tense in the first, second or third person.⁷³⁵ Thus he makes clear that the issue is not justification of the belief itself, but the grounds for the belief, whether they are reasonable and acceptable. It is the conviction with which the belief is held that determines whether it qualifies for the ‘believer’ as knowledge. In a final chapter on epistemology, Brümmer looks at the issue of religious faith, using as example Job’s statement ‘I know that my Redeemer lives.’ In terms of the foregoing, there is no reason why Job should not consider his conviction that his redeemer lives knowledge, Brümmer concludes. He adds: *I may consider it knowledge if I share his conviction and his reasons for holding that conviction.*

Plantinga and Brümmer thus have in common that they dispute the necessity to *justify* a faith statement for it to qualify as knowledge (and, I add, have authority). They differ, though, as to what the problem actually is. Plantinga argues that the question should be whether the *process* that causes one to become convinced of something is *warranted*. Brümmer argues that the question should be whether the *premises* that cause one to conclude something are *justified*.

In the report God met Ons, the theory that truth is neither objective nor subjective but relative was proposed (2.12.2.7.8). The report concluded that faith is justified by the interaction between Scripture and the person, by “what Scripture does to me”. This is different again from both Plantinga and Brümmer.

3.1.2.2 Impact on Confessing

How does this impact on the issue of confessions and subscription to them? The more seriously man began to reflect on the nature of his knowing, the more evident it became just how complex his knowing is. In part, this explains the increasing intensity of the confessional debate. The differing stances of rationalists and anti-rationalists had their effect in theological circles also. One may think of the debates between Modernists and Apologists on the one hand and Groningers and Ethicals on the other. Elements of this debate are also found in the discussions between Juridical and Medical Calvinists. Confessions, as constant documents in principle, were considered improper by some because their substance cannot be justified (e.g. Hofstede de Groot (2.5.2.5)). Both Plantinga and Brümmer, in different ways, dispute this.

Whoever is right (and more models probably exist), the obscurity with respect to the question shows that epistemological arguments are insufficient to deny the rights of confessions to exist. Given even the present twenty-first century positions in epistemology, the premise “the substance of ecclesiastical confessions cannot be justified and cannot therefore be authoritative” will not bear the weight of the conclusion “ecclesiastical confessions are illegitimate endeavours”. Epistemology is not the proper road to follow (at this stage at least, given where the discipline is at) in the search for answers and solutions to the confessional issue.

For the confessional debate this means that the arguments are flawed of those who:
 (1) *argue that because confessional substance cannot be justified it cannot be held binding (e.g. Groningers, Modernists)*
 (2) *do their best to justify confessional substance so that it may qualify as “knowledge” (e.g. Apologists, Traditional Calvinists)*

One may also question whether the epistemological approach as such is justified. For example, are the ‘knowledge’ and ‘faith’ of Lord’s Day 7 of the Heidelberg Catechism the same concepts as ‘knowledge’ and ‘belief’ in epistemology? The Hebrew **עֵדוּת** has particular connotations of ‘relationship’ and ‘experience’ that are beyond a rational understanding of ‘knowledge’. It may well be that one should completely steer clear of epistemological approaches.⁷³⁶

⁷³⁵ An illustration makes this clear. A Christian will say of a fellow Christian “he knows that Jesus is alive” but not of a Moslem “he knows that Mohammed is God’s prophet.” When a person says “He knows” he is also saying “I believe”.

⁷³⁶ See Maris, *Geloof en Ervaring*, 212-223.

3.1.2.2.3 Conclusion

I therefore conclude that the function of confessions should not be affected by questioning the certainty of the substance of a confession by asking epistemologically whether the qualification 'knowledge' is fitting for this substance. The epistemological question remains undecided. Tentative conclusions ought not be used to undermine the functioning of confessions, especially since there is more to the issue than epistemology. As I will later indicate, I believe the authority of a confession lies more in its character as a communal confession of faith (cf. 3.3.8 and 3.4.6).

3.1.2.3 SUMMARY

Positions taken in the fields of semantics and epistemology have important consequences for the matter of confessing and confessional subscription.

Not the locutionary act (that which is said, written) but the illocutionary act (that which is intended) gives meaning to a statement. Like all statements, confessional statements can function as constatives, expressives, commissives, and prescriptives at the same time. One may not limit their function to one of these alone. It is also important to understand the interplay between words and concepts in order to grasp the working of a confessional statement over a longer period of time and in different contexts.

The definition of knowledge as a *justified* true belief has troubled the confessional issue to a great extent. It was thought that because faith articles cannot classify as knowledge, they cannot be held authoritative. I have shown that epistemological questions concerning the justification of a belief in order for it to be considered knowledge continues unanswered in a definitive sense. Both Plantinga and Brümmer have argued that faith articles need not be rationally justified to qualify as knowledge.

Given the uncertainty in the epistemological debate, I have challenged the use of epistemological arguments to undermine or shore up confessions and subscription to them. In the past, the confessional debate has been very much an epistemological issue. Epistemology should not be allowed to play such an important role in the debate today.

3.1.3 ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASPECTS

A third scientific discipline that is of importance for this study is the discipline of anthropology and psychology, in particular the field of social psychology, for confessions bring to expression a group identity, and subscription to confessions implies individual conformity to a group norm. To what extent does the interaction between the individual and the group impact on the functioning of confessional statements in church circles?

It is my impression that reflection on the functioning of confessions and confessional subscription has paid too little attention to this field of science. I am not able to correct this, since anthropology and psychology do not belong to my fields of expertise. Further complicating the matter is the fact that one crucial field, that of social psychology, is a field much in development. Many theories abound, and I am in no position to judge such theories. An eclectic approach would be arbitrary and not do justice to the matter. The following is heavily dependent on secondary sources⁷³⁷ and intends no more than to indicate where within the issue of confessions and confessional subscription might be asked questions of an anthropological-social psychological character. It is by way of this example that I wish to indicate that more thought needs to be done on this score.

⁷³⁷ Metaal, Jansz, and Fischer, *Psychologie*; Marmet and Meyer, *Kleine Sociale Psychologie*; Vonk, *Sociale Psychologie*.

3.1.3.1 CONFORMISM, APPROPRIATION, AND COMPLIANCE

Confessions are an expression of faith convictions. They may thus be considered an expression of identity. Confessions state how one understands reality, one's own place in reality, and how one should act within that reality. A basic question in the field of psychology is how identity is formed. While theories differ, there seems to be general agreement that social processes—the interaction between individuals—play a large and probably dominant role in the formation of identity. The process by which identity is formed is in large part one of observation, evaluation, and positive or negative action. With respect to the church, one might say that a person becomes acquainted with the confessional substance of a particular church, evaluates it and decides whether or not to appropriate it (fully or partially) and live in accordance with it. Within Dutch Reformed circles, this is the process of catechetical instruction leading to public profession of faith.

There seems to be within each human being an inner desire to conform to the group, to create an identity based on the social spheres in which one moves. The experiments of Asch during the 1950s have indicated that such a desire to conform may even override personal perceptions.

The experiment went as follows. Asch showed a card with a line on it to a group of six people. He also showed them a second card with three lines on it, one of equal size to the line on the first card, one obviously longer and one obviously shorter. He asked the six people to indicate which line on the second card was equal in length to the line on the first card. Five of the six people would purposely give the same wrong answer. The sixth person had a tendency to conform his choice to that of the other five.⁷³⁸

During the 1980s, Asch's experiments were repeated. It became clear that the results were remarkably different from those during the 1950s. Individuals had less tendency to conform in the 1980s than in the 1950s.⁷³⁹ The conclusion seems warranted that individuals today are less likely to conform than in the past. This would imply that individual identity is less shaped by social identity, and that social norms and values are less likely to be appropriated by an individual. Further study may indicate that this is one of the reasons why confessional subscription is such a hotly debated issue today, and why many feel that the present process of subscription needs to be reviewed.

Dekker has pleaded in 1999 for a return to "believing on authority" (2.14.2.11). This is, it would seem, a plea for a return to social conformism. Given the spirit of the age, I wonder whether this would in fact work. Should not more attention be paid to the appropriation of the substance of the confession?

Experiments have shown that individuals may react in various ways to social pressure to conform. One way is the appropriation of the group norm and living by it. A second is referred to as 'compliance'. In this situation, an individual outside the group indicates that he complies with the norm of the group for the sake of the group, but not on account of an inner conviction. It is possible that long-term exposure to a social influence may see 'compliance' change into 'appropriation'.⁷⁴⁰

Asch tested the measure of appropriation by asking partakers of his experiments individually whether they would like to change their response. Most of those who had been misled by the group indicated that they indeed would like to.

A third reaction is to distance oneself from the group. It means rejection of the norms applied in the group.

I believe this analysis is of interest to the matter of confessional subscription. To what extent is confessional subscription a matter of 'compliance', and to what extent is it a matter of 'appropriation'? Given the fact that a confession functions as a set of norms, the picture is

⁷³⁸ As described in Vonk, *Sociale Psychologie*, 456-459.

⁷³⁹ Metaal, Jansz, and Fischer, *Psychologie*, 198-199.

⁷⁴⁰ Vonk, *Sociale Psychologie*, 460-461.

probably more complicated: in part ‘compliance’ and in part ‘appropriation’. It would be interesting to see in cases of ‘rejection’ (the third reaction) what the reasons for this are.

3.1.3.2 IN CLOSING

The foregoing makes clear that the field of anthropology and psychology, in particular social psychology, is of relevance to the issue of confessions and confessional subscription. The issues of individual identity, social identity, and conformism undeniably play a role in the function of confessional loyalty in ecclesiastical circles. There are probably more aspects that I have, in my ignorance, overlooked. Given the changes in society—especially its individualization and fragmentation—it would be most appropriate if the process of reconsidering the functioning of confessional subscription, and especially the form given to it, included reflection from a social psychological perspective.

3.1.4 ASPECTS OF LAW

In a study of a church political nature, it is appropriate to insert a paragraph on law in general. After all, church polity is to the church what the judicial system is to the state. While there may be substantive differences, church polity can be formally considered a field of law.⁷⁴¹ In The Netherlands, the separation between church and state is found in the constitution, granting churches a larger measure of juridical autonomy than other persons or bodies. Nevertheless, processes and developments in the field of law in general have repercussions for processes and developments in the field of church polity. I think, for example, of the comparison of confessions and church orders with constitutions, and the role that contractarian and democratic notions play in the debate. There are undoubtedly issues that require consideration.

This subsection looks more closely at a number of issues. Because law does not belong to my field of expertise, I wish to do no more than raise some questions that I believe require closer study. I will first look at the distinction between substantive and formal law. This distinction is helpful in understanding how confessions and subscription to them are authoritative (3.1.4.1). Next I will review three ways of seeing law: positivism, natural law, and interactionism. I believe that these three are also found in the practice of reformed polity, and have left their mark on the debate on confessional subscription (3.1.4.2). Then I will look at the various sources for justice and suggest how this functions within the practice of reformed polity. Just as there is tension within the field of law depending on one’s approach to law when it comes to these sources, so there is tension within the practice of reformed polity. This tension is felt in, among other ways, the application of confessional subscription (3.1.4.3). Finally, I will look at the common distinction of the three arms of government, the so-called *trias politica*, and its application in the spheres of Reformed polity. For it is rather curious to note that with the exception of the NHK and PKN, Reformed churches vest the *trias politica* in the same body (3.1.4.4).

In what follows, I have drawn heavily on a standard introductory publication on law by W. Witteveen, and occasionally consulted the general handbooks to Dutch civil law by P. Scholten and J. B. M. Vranken.⁷⁴²

3.1.4.1 SUBSTANTIVE AND FORMAL LAW

One way of classifying law is to distinguish its substance from its forms and procedures. Substantive law is the area of law that looks at the substance or goals. Formal law is the area of law that looks at the procedures used to make substantive law work. Formal law is never an end in itself; it should always serve substantive law.

⁷⁴¹ Albeit not civil law but private law (Scholten, *Asser Algemeen Deel 1*, 32).

⁷⁴² Witteveen, *Geordende Wereld*; Scholten, *Asser Algemeen Deel 1*; Vranken, *Asser Algemeen Deel 2*; Vranken, *Algemeen Deel 3*.

With respect to confessions and subscription, the maintenance of confessions that ought to be complied with can be considered to belong to substantial law. The procedure to ensure that confessions continue to be held and complied with is subscription. This could be considered to belong to formal law. The processes for drawing up confessions and executing stipulations with respect to subscription also belong to formal law.

The distinction is helpful in ordering the material of law. It could also prove to be helpful in sorting out the various aspects that relate to confessions and subscription to them. When discussing the authority of confessions (3.3.8) and authority of subscription (3.4.6), this distinction will play an ordering role.

3.1.4.2 POSITIVISM, NATURAL LAW, AND INTERACTIONISM

In general, three ways of viewing law or approaches to law may be distinguished. These approaches are concerned with how law has import in a given situation—how it ought to function. The three approaches are not to be seen as mutually exclusive, but rather as extremes to which jurists tend in greater or lesser measure. Relying heavily on Witteveen, I will first briefly describe these three extreme approaches and then explain how I think they function in the debate on confessions and subscription.

Positivism is the approach that concentrates attention on **positioned law**, law as it has been fixed in texts such as laws, constitutions, and treaties, and definitions of terms as found in commentaries on laws and jurisdiction. Law is a text. Positivists distinguish between primary laws, which describes norms for the behaviour of those addressed by laws, and secondary laws, which indicate how primary laws might be drawn up and by whom. Advantages of this approach are that the law is easily found, is easily understood by a non-jurist, and it is inherently democratic because subjects accept the legislator's prescription. However, there are also major disadvantages. Positivism does not have a clear-cut stance on the execution of law. Further, in this approach, the ultimate basis for law is the existing situation and not an underlying concept such as 'righteousness'. Thirdly, law is merely judicial, it has no social aspect. Finally, while the process may seem democratic, it is not necessarily so since the subjects do not always have the choice to reject a prescription of the legislator.

With respect to the second disadvantage, it would seem to me that the democratic process, i.e., some form of the social contract, is the final justification for the existence of laws within the positivist approach.

The approach of **Natural Law** works with the concept of *ratio* (reason). Law is that which is reasonable and justified. Natural Law posits alongside *positioned law* the existence and relevance of *ideal law*. *Ideal law* constitutes all absolute commands and prohibitions that exist for humanity. *Positioned law* is always subservient to *ideal law*. In the course of time, some parts of *ideal law* have been articulated in, for example, human rights treaties. Some advantages of this approach are that one is not dependent on the *status quo*, law is broader than just the body of juridical texts, and the process is democratic since each law is tested to the norm every time it is applied. The major disadvantage is how to determine what belongs to *ideal law*, what is determinative, what is justified.

This disadvantage is illustrated by Witteveen with the discussion on the collision between equal rights for men and women and freedom of religion. This is heavily debated in The Netherlands because of the existence of a political party, the Staatkundig-Gereformeerde Partij, with adherents among the more experientially-inclined Reformed (Gereformeerde Bond, Gereformeerde Gemeenten, and the right wing of the CGKN) who exclude women from full membership. In 2005, a judge determined that the SGP was not allowed to receive state subsidies on account of its position on membership. However, the party was not outlawed as unconstitutional or being in conflict with international human rights treaties.

Interactionism is not a position between positivism and natural law but takes a third position. It looks at the way in which people interact in law. Law is activity. Rules are not imposed commands or absolute norms, but the articulation of relations between people and what people may reasonably expect from others in a given situation. Law is a means of bringing collisions in the

plurality of perspectives to a good end. Interactionism focuses attention on the social implications of law. Advantages of this approach include that there is more attention for the different workings of law, the jurist is a mediator that brings to the fore various perspectives in an act of law, and it is democratic, since law is the product of a discussion. There are some serious disadvantages though. A major problem is that interactionism has no clear criteria for law and authority. Further, there is a large measure of relativism—there is no priority in law when laws collide. Law is basically what is most convincing in any given situation.

Positivism, natural law, and interactionism are three extremes of interpretation. As Witteveen notes, the above descriptions are in fact caricatures. However, since jurists tend to the various positions in varying degrees, the three systems of interpretation are important. The debate between the three actually explains why there is always tension in the application of law.

Having become acquainted with these approaches, it has struck me that much tension in the debates on confessions and subscription to them seems to coincide with the distinctions here made. The positivist approach is that advocated especially by Traditionalist Calvinists, and would seem to be present also with those who believe in perfecting the confessions, such as Praamsma. The natural law approach is found with Groningers and Modernists, and would seem to be present also with those such as the Apologists or Wiskerke who strongly advocated that confessions be read in the light of Scripture. The interactionist approach seems to align more with the activities of Gunning jr. and the Ethicals in general, as well as men like Augustijn and Berkouwer, and the report *God met Ons* in the twentieth century. I believe there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the debates on confessional subscription of the past two centuries are in part due to different views of how law works.

It is helpful to look at this a little more closely within the boundaries of orthodox Calvinism. Because Reformed theology advocates the idea of the priesthood of all believers, the church membership is closely involved in church processes. Church polity is not a matter of specialized legislators and jurists, but something with which all church members can become involved. I point out that ecclesiastical assemblies are both legislative and judicial, and ministers (the only professionals) are never in a majority in these assemblies. As such, I can well imagine that the positivist approach, being understandable and clear cut, would have most appeal to the church membership. The natural law approach, which goes well with the *sola Scriptura* of the Reformation, could well appeal to those who are somewhat more specialized and have a positive view of man's ability to understand divine revelation. The interactionist approach could well appeal also to those who are somewhat more specialized but have a more negative view of man's abilities, in view of the divine character of revelation and man's sinfulness. I cannot substantiate these suppositions scientifically, but today's daily church life would suggest some sort of relationship. This ought to be investigated further by someone at home in ecclesiastical circles but more at home than myself in the field of law. It could well help orthodox Calvinists understand more clearly what processes are taking place in their circles.

3.1.4.3 THE VARIOUS SOURCES FOR JUSTICE

In the workings of law, various sources for law are used. The most obvious source for justice is that which is commonly referred to as law: the articulated and positioned prescriptions and prohibitions promulgated by the lawgiver. However, there are more sources for law. One may think of treaties that establish rights, privileges, and duties. Another common source for justice is jurisprudence: the decisions of courts, the argumentation of lawyers, and commentaries on the

law.⁷⁴³ These three sources for justice have in common that they are easily consulted, since they have been recorded. More problematic is a fourth source for law: common practice, unwritten rules, justified expectations, and so on. Witteveen explains that with respect to this fourth source, something is considered binding if it meets the criteria of *usus*, it is indeed practised, and *opinio necessitatis*, the idea that what people commonly do ought also, from a juridical perspective, to take place. Scholten points out that there is a hierarchy in regard to authority where it concerns the various sources for justice.⁷⁴⁴

Passing on to the field of Reformed church polity, these various sources are also found here. First of all, there is the law: the church order and various subsidiary regulations. Confessional documents to some extent fulfil the function of treaties. One might, for example, consider BC art. 27-32 the ‘Interchurch Declaration on the Nature of the Church’. Church jurisprudence is formed by the acts of its various assemblies, from church councils through to general synods. Finally, just as in society many relationships are structured according to custom and unwritten rules, so in the church there are many unarticulated codes of conduct.

Witteveen points out that one of the main problems with having various sources for justice is the question of what has priority when there are clashes. Positivism prefers law and jurisprudence, natural law prefers treaties and their underlying ideas, and interactionists have more an eye to common practice. Following Witteveen in using euthanasia as an illustration, I understand that positivism leads to a letter-of-the-law approach (euthanasia is murder), natural law to an ethical approach (the right to self-determination), and interactionism to a pragmatic approach (what is best for all parties involved); bearing in mind, of course, that the three views are extreme caricatures of reality.

The same problem exists in the field of church polity, especially when it comes to confessional subscription. A positivist approach leads to a strict application of the form of subscription, such as that of the Juridical Calvinists and of the GKN(v) during the 1960s. A natural law approach tries to bring into the picture underlying concepts such as faithfulness to Reformed doctrine and goodwill towards the church, such as are found with Medical Calvinists and the NGK. An interactionist approach looks more at what lives within the church, what is acceptable and practicable, such as is found with the Ethicals and the SoW/PKN. These are more than likely gross oversimplifications. However, the coincidence of approaches and debates makes it more than likely that there is something in this nevertheless. In the debates on confessional subscription, there would seem to be more at issue than merely one’s commitment to Reformed doctrine. A thorough consideration of one’s approach to juridical sources is probably as important as the rewriting of a form of subscription.

3.1.4.4 *TRIAS POLITICA*

In the field of law it is common to distinguish between the three arms of government, the so-called *trias politica*. These are the legislative, executive, and judicial arms of government. In Dutch Law it has become popular to see ‘executive’ not only in the sense of ‘enforcement’ but also in the sense of ‘application’. Thus the parliaments and councils are legislative, the armed forces, police and civil service are executive, and the courts are judicial. Witteveen describes how there is a pendulous movement between ‘separation of power’ and ‘balance of power’ in the history of the *trias politica*. There is a tendency to make the three arms as independent from each other as possible, and there is a tendency to have the three arms control each other and act as

⁷⁴³ On this score there is an inherent difference between Anglo-Saxon tradition and the continental tradition. In principle the former considers precedence binding, the latter considers the judge entirely free. In practice the difference seems to be more of a gradual kind. See Scholten, *Asser Algemeen Deel 1*, 86-87.

⁷⁴⁴ Witteveen, *Geordende Wereld*, 82; Scholten, *Asser Algemeen Deel 1*, 89.

counterbalances. Whichever tendency dominates in a society, the three arms are still distinguishable.

In view of this, it is rather curious to see that in Reformed polity (with the exception of the NHK post-1951 and the PKN) the three arms continue to be concentrated in the same body: the ecclesiastical assemblies.⁷⁴⁵ Ecclesiastical assemblies are primarily legislative and judicial. In the polity of Dort, especially after the Doleantie, executive power rests almost exclusively with one type of these assemblies, the church councils. One may question the wisdom and correctness of this. Firstly, would the concept of connectionalism—which I consider to have been present in the original ecclesiology underlying the church order of Dort—plead for executive power in the other assemblies also? Furthermore, do not the lessons of civil history indicate that it would be wiser to separate the legislative and judicial arms? One may counter that the temporary nature of broader assemblies, and the largely unwritten rule that no person may vote on the same issue twice, even if he is involved the second time as a member of another assembly, provides sufficient warrant for fairness. It may well be that the NHK and PKN have chosen separation because their broader assemblies have a less temporary character.⁷⁴⁶ However, the price one pays for temporary assemblies is less expertise present in the assembly. In practice such expertise is usually guaranteed in the form of expert advisors to assemblies. One may counter, though, that receiving expert advice is often a voluntary matter.

With respect to confessions and subscription to them, clearer segregation of the legislative and judicial arms—I am thinking in particular of the party that draws up the confession and the party that judges whether one has breached subscription—would be helpful. My impression is that in this situation the pendulum would swing towards a balance of power rather than a separation of power.

The foregoing is a simplified presentation of the issue. There is probably more at stake. This again brings me to the conclusion that further thought is required on the application of the *trias politica* in the spheres of Reformed polity in general, and confessional subscription in particular.

3.1.4.5 CONCLUSION

I have not been in a position to delve further into the field of law. The cursory and superficial acquaintance with various judicial issues which I have gained do suggest that it would be desirable that this receive more attention in the field of Reformed church polity.

3.1.5 IN CLOSING

The foregoing has set out to indicate that ideas seemingly far removed from the subject of confessions and subscription to them may in fact have far-reaching influence on the issue. Dogmatic choices, philosophical presuppositions, psychological processes, and the processes of law all affect the matter to a greater or lesser degree. My impression is that those debating the issue of confessing and subscription have generally not recognized this sufficiently. I am in no position to correct this, since my expertise is limited to theology. However, rather than desisting from looking further afield, I have chosen to look at some issues to indicate that inter-disciplinary study is required for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of confessing and subscription to confessions.

⁷⁴⁵ That they originally were not separated is not so curious: the necessity to separate the three arms was first clearly stated in the aftermath of the English civil war during the mid 17th century (Witteveen, *Geordende Wereld*, 259).

⁷⁴⁶ Another reason could well be the important role that experts in law played in the drafting of CO-1951 (the P. Scholten who edited the Asser series coordinated the drafting of CO-1951) and CO-2004.

3.2 Faith, Doctrine and Church

Between looking at matters that might be considered to belong to the framework of confessional subscription and the issues of confessing and subscribing confessions, I consider it useful to look at three issues that form the connection between the framework and the matter to be studied. These are the concepts that are generally related to the verb ‘to confess’ in the context in which I am writing: the subject (the church) and the object (faith or doctrine). Because these three concepts recur frequently in my systematic study of confessing and subscribing, it seemed helpful to look at these matters in advance.

One of the dilemmas posed in the issue of confessions and subscription to them is the question whether confessions present a summation of *faith* articles or *doctrinal* articles. The historical survey makes clear that a certain tension is felt at this point. For example, the question arose whether confessions form a starting-point (e.g. GKN[s] in de Kuitert case, 2.12.2.7.7), or are milestones or direction-signs along the road of religious life (e.g. Van der Dussen, 2.14.2.8), or indeed whether they express the goal to which one presses (e.g. Van Ruler, 2.11.2.5), or are always everywhere to be enforced (e.g. De Gier, 2.14.2.10). Those who see confessions primarily as summations of faith-articles tend to the former positions, emphasizing that confessions express what one believes at a certain point. Those who see confessions primarily as summations of doctrinal-articles tend to the latter positions, emphasizing that confessions express what one is to believe. This same tension lies at the bottom of the question whether confessions contain objective or subjective statements regarding reality and activity: do they form a norm outside the confessor (and thus are objective) that is appropriated, or do they form a conviction within the confessor (and thus subjective) that is expressed? The debates concerning confessional membership in the NHK, SoW and PKN would have this question phrased as follows: is it justifiable to demand an individual to conform his or her faith to a set of doctrinal articles?⁷⁴⁷

At the root of all these questions lies the matter of the relationship between *faith* and *doctrine*, and how these two concepts relate to the church. In the Dutch Reformed tradition, confessions are described in both terms concurrently. For example, the Form for Public Profession of Faith used in the GKN(v) asks the candidate who seeks access to the Lord’s Supper:

Do you confess the *doctrine* of the Old and New Testaments, summarized in the Apostles’ Creed and taught here in this Christian church, to be the true and complete doctrine of salvation?

During the celebration of the Lord’s Supper this same Apostles’ Creed is introduced with the words: Let us now with heart and mouth make confession of our *faith*...⁷⁴⁸

In this chapter I intend to explore these two terms, first individually (3.2.1-2) and then in relationship to each other (3.2.3). I will conclude that the concepts ‘faith’ and ‘doctrine’ have a common element, implying that many of the discussions arise from a false antithesis. Next I will look at how faith and doctrine function in the church to discover that this common element belongs to the essence of the church’s confessing (3.2.4). I will close with some thoughts on the mutability and maintenance of faith and doctrine to conclude that it is unwise to speak of the *maintenance* of the faith or doctrine of the church (3.2.5).

3.2.1 FAITH

The term ‘faith’ occurs frequently in discussions on confessions and binding to them. What does this term actually mean and, more importantly, what does it imply with respect to confessions? Those are the two questions I wish to answer in what follows. I will first review the definition of ‘faith’ (3.2.1.1) and then look at a common distinction made with respect to faith (3.2.1.2).

⁷⁴⁷ Note how the Heidelberg Catechism asks “What then *must* a Christian *believe*?” (q&a 22).

⁷⁴⁸ GKN(v), *Gereformeerde Kerkboek*, 520, 526.

3.2.1.1 DEFINITION OF ‘GELOOF’ (‘FAITH’ / ‘BELIEF’)

What does ‘faith’ mean? I will first touch on the translation of the Dutch term ‘*geloof*’, then review Scriptural and lexical data on the relevant terms to come to an understanding of ‘faith’.

The Dutch term ‘*geloof*’ can be translated by both the terms ‘faith’ and ‘belief’. In the English language, it would seem that it is possible to distinguish between two aspects to faith: conviction and entrustment. A ‘belief’ or a set of ‘beliefs’ is defined as the postulation of a matter or matters that are considered but not proven to be valid. ‘Faith’—the concept is abstract and thus without an article—is more closely related to concepts such as ‘trust’ and ‘loyalty’. It would seem that in the English language the term ‘faith’ has in fact incorporated the concept of ‘belief’ so that it has also become possible to speak of ‘the faith’, which is then ‘a body of beliefs’. Thus too it can be explained that in English the verb is ‘to believe’ and the noun generally ‘faith’, while in Dutch the verb is ‘*gelooven*’ and the noun ‘*geloof*’.

Within the church, the concept of ‘faith’ is very much determined by the way in which it is used in Scripture. Hence it is important to come to an understanding of how the concept functions there.⁷⁴⁹ In the Hebrew language there is no noun for ‘faith’; the terms that come the closest are related to the verb **אָמַן**, meaning ‘to confirm, support, be faithful, be reliable, trust, believe.’⁷⁵⁰ The Greek term for ‘faith’ is πίστις, and can be translated with terms such as ‘fidelity, trust, assurance, oath, proof, guarantee, faith.’

It has been argued that πίστις can only be considered to indicate an attitude and not a substance; it cannot refer to a belief or set of beliefs.⁷⁵¹ However, in 1 Tim. 4:6 the expression τοις λόγοις τῆς πίστεως καὶ τῆς καλῆς διδασκαλίας (“the words of the faith and the noble teaching”) uses the terms ‘faith’ and ‘teaching’ in such a way that it would be very odd to think that πίστις could not refer to a substance. The consensus of commentaries from various circles is that the term here indeed refers to substantive statements of faith.⁷⁵²

Thus, while it is quite possible that the idea of an attitude is especially prominent where Scripture uses terms related to **אָמַן** and πίστις, it is incorrect to posit that the concept can never be translated by ‘belief’. The concept has a substantive side also in Scripture.

How is the term ‘*geloof*’ used in the Dutch language? *Van Dale* defines the term as follows:

1. trusting in the truth of another’s allegations or promises, or in the agreement between a story and the truth; 2. Accepting as real and true and recognizing the existences and revelations of a divinity; 3 and 4. The conviction that something exists; 5. A certain form of religious conviction; 6. The trust that a person enjoys with others.

‘*Geloofsovertuiging*’ (‘faith conviction’) is defined by *Van Dale* as ‘1. Conviction with respect to religious faith; 2. The doctrinal theses which make up the substance of the faith.’ Furthermore, ‘*geloofsartikel*’ (‘article of faith’, ‘belief’) is considered to be a synonym for ‘article of doctrine’ or ‘dogma’.⁷⁵³

Thus both Scripture in its original languages and the Dutch language use the term ‘*geloof*’ to reflect both an attitude and a substance, both an activity or state of mind and a reality. There is faith (trust, fidelity, faithfulness) and there is belief (conviction, knowledge).

When it comes to the concept of ‘faith’ in religious circles, one must not restrict oneself to a purely epistemological or psychological understanding of this term. Having a purely epistemological understanding limits the verb ‘to believe’ to an activity of the intellect: it is understood in the light of its relationship to ‘knowledge’. Having a purely psychological understanding limits the verb ‘to believe’ to an activity of the heart: it is understood in the light of

⁷⁴⁹ See Van Genderen and Velema, *BGD*, 538.

⁷⁵⁰ *BDB*, 52b-53a.

⁷⁵¹ *TLNT*, vol. 3 ‘πίστις’.

⁷⁵² See 3.2.3 below, where the text is discussed in further depth.

⁷⁵³ *Van Dale*, s.vv. “*geloof*,” “*geloofsovertuiging*,” and “*geloofsartikel*.”

its relationship to ‘confidence’. The concept ‘faith’ relates to both man’s intellect and man’s psyche; it relates to all aspects of man, and even transcends the combination of epistemology and psychology.⁷⁵⁴

Some have argued that confessions of faith cannot be fixed in writing because faith has no substance. It will be clear from the foregoing that in my opinion this conclusion is unwarranted. Faith is not to be restricted to an attitude or activity, it has a substance and thus is able to be articulated.

3.2.1.2 DISTINCTIONS WITH RESPECT TO FAITH

I wish to look at two distinctions with respect to faith. The first regards the distinction *fides qua* and *fides quae*, frequently encountered in the historical survey. The second relates to Scripture texts that speak of ‘measures of faith’, ‘great faith’, and ‘little faith’.

3.2.1.2.1 *Fides Qua (Creditor) and Fides Quae (Creditor)*

A common distinction found in debates on confessions is that of *fides qua (creditor)* and *fides quae (creditor)*. *Fides qua*—literally ‘faith by which’—is the act of faith, the attitude or activity of believing. *Fides quae*—literally ‘faith which’—is the substance of faith, that which is believed, a set of convictions. In the debate on confessions and subscription, some have emphasized one aspect at the expense of the other. For example, Groningers focused so heavily on the activity of faith that this activity—*fides qua*—actually became the essence of faith, and the substance of faith—*fides quae*—was considered accidental to faith: the fundamental issue is not *what* one believes but *that* one believes (e.g. Hofstede de Groot, 2.5.2.5). The NHK as a national church took this stance officially in 1951 (2.11.2.2.3) and it is continued by the PKN as a whole today.

In debates on confessions and subscription, this distinction at times proved an impediment because the two sides were considered an antithesis and thus were played out against each other. Hence Groningers considered confessional documents improper, for such documents tended to petrify the activity of believing. In reaction, Traditionalists focused all their attention on the substance of the documents, giving the impression that intellectual assent to their contents comprised the whole of faith.

I believe both positions ought to be rejected. *Fides qua* and *fides quae* do not form a dilemma, but are two sides of the concept of faith. Confessing one’s faith is the act of articulating both *fides qua* and *fides quae*. One might say that *fides quae* is the substance of one’s confessing and *fides qua* the state of mind in one’s confessing. Both can be stated in writing.

For example, HC LD 16, speaks of Christ’s descent into hell in terms of its substance (Christ has set me free from the pain and anguish of hell) and state of mind (I am assured and richly comforted). This is probably a good illustration of what S. van Velzen meant when he considered not only the ‘what’ (substance) but also the ‘how’ (state of mind) of a confessional writing to have binding force (2.8.2.12).⁷⁵⁵

3.2.1.2.2 *Measures of Faith, Great Faith, Little Faith*

In Romans 12:3, Paul writes of ‘(different) measures of faith.’ Although opinions differ as to what is to be understood by ‘measures’,⁷⁵⁶ it is generally agreed that faith is used here with the connotations of trust and fidelity, of *fides qua*. This implies that different measures of faith cannot mean different sets of faith articles as if one ‘measure of faith’ might include the divinity of Christ, and another ‘measure of faith’ might exclude the divinity of Christ. A number of times, the Lord Jesus is recorded as speaking of faith in a seemingly quantitative manner: we read phrases such as ‘little faith’ and ‘great faith’. Here too the concept ‘faith’ is primarily *fides qua*. The point is

⁷⁵⁴ Van Genderen and Velema, *BGD*, 542.

⁷⁵⁵ With thanks to J. W. Maris for confirming this last remark.

⁷⁵⁶ See Dunn, *Romans*, 721-722 for the debate and associated literature

whether those believing have confidence in the abilities of God and his Son. Is he able to heal the servant (Matt. 8:10)? Is he able to still the storm (Matt. 8:26)?

In short, quantitative references to faith in Scripture relate not to the substance of faith but to the manner in which faith is exercised, *fides qua*. ‘Measure of faith’ may be seen as ‘the extent to which one commits oneself’. This therefore affects not the quantitative substance or depth of detail in a confession, but rather the fervour with which a matter is defended.

Some would also wish to see here a discussion of the concepts ‘strong faith’ and ‘weak faith’. I point out that the concepts ‘strong faith’ and ‘weak faith’ are based on mis-readings of Scripture. The texts (Rom. 14:1; 15:1; speak of ‘strong in faith’ and ‘weak in faith’ and thus do not relate to distinctions with respect to faith but distinctions with respect to how one stands in faith.

3.2.1.3 SUMMARY

‘*Geloof*’ is an inner conviction that results in trust, fidelity and knowledge. While *fides qua* and *fides quae* are distinguishable, they do not form a dilemma. Faith can be brought to expression in its various aspects. This bringing to expression is the activity of confessing. Hence confessions are an expression or articulation of faith. The Scriptural phrases ‘measures of faith’, ‘great faith’ and ‘little faith’ relate to *fides qua*, not to the substance of one’s faith. They can thus not be used to justify varying limits for confessional subscription.

3.2.2 DOCTRINE

In the Dutch Reformed tradition, confessions are not only described as expressions of faith but also as summations of doctrine. Thus, for example, the parents presenting children for baptism are asked whether they hold as true ‘the doctrine of the Old and New Testaments, summarized in the Apostles’ Creed’.⁷⁵⁷

In this section I will explore the concept of ‘doctrine’ and review the implications thereof for confessions.

3.2.2.1. DEFINITION OF ‘LEER’ (‘DOCTRINE’)

The Dutch term ‘*leer*’ is best translated with the English term ‘doctrine’. The Dutch term is etymologically related to the verb ‘*leren*’ meaning ‘to teach’. In English, the connection between ‘doctrine’ and ‘to teach’ is not as obvious. To make this more obvious, the terms ‘doctrine’ and ‘teaching’ will be used interchangeably in what follows.

Dutch translations of Scripture translate the following Hebrew and Greek terms with ‘*leer*’ or ‘*leren*’: the noun לֵקֶלֶךְ, at times the niphal of לָרַךְ and the associated noun הִרְרָךְ, the verb לָמַד, and the hiphil and hophal of the verb לָרַךְ; the word-group διδασκαλία, διδάσκω, διδασκαλία, ἑτεροδιδασκαλέω, and finally occasionally λόγος. The nouns הִרְרָךְ and διδασκαλία are particularly important for my purposes. Lexical research makes clear that from the perspective of Scripture ‘*leer*’ is to be taken in its most literal meaning: ‘that which is taught’, and carries the connotation ‘that which gives direction.’

This is an important observation. For in current usage, the idea of ‘teaching’ (‘*leren*’) is no longer inherent in the concept of ‘doctrine’ (‘*leer*’). The Dutch term ‘*leer*’ is defined by *Van Dale* as follows: “(1) that which is taught with respect to a matter or complex of matters; (2) the conceptual expression of a religious faith accepted by a religious community; (3) dogma.”⁷⁵⁸ It is instructive to take note of a remark made in a Dutch dictionary dating from 1916 with respect to the noun ‘*leer*’: “In connection with *leeren* in the sense of to educate, to instruct. However, this

⁷⁵⁷ GKN(v), *Gereformeerd Kerkboek*, 515.

⁷⁵⁸ *Van Dale*, s.v. “leer”.

concept is **no longer** always clearly at the forefront.”⁷⁵⁹ During the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there seems to have been a shift in meaning. By definition, ‘doctrine’ was no longer ‘that which is taught’. It had come to mean ‘a set of faith articles.’ This shift in meaning is evident also in reflection on confessional subscription, and has had the potential to cause confusion and misunderstanding.⁷⁶⁰ For the ‘teaching’ element was no longer inherent in the concept of ‘doctrine’.

As noted, *Van Dale* reports that ‘*leer*’ can also be synonymous with ‘*dogma*’, equivalent to the English ‘dogma’.⁷⁶¹ The term is derived from Ancient Greek, where it could refer to an opinion (especially philosophical) or an officially adopted resolution. We see it used in this sense in Scripture on occasion.⁷⁶² In the early church, ‘dogma’ was appropriated; first, to express a religious opinion (in analogy to the philosophical use) and later to refer to officially adopted doctrine.⁷⁶³ The Reformers tended to use the terms *doctrina* and *dogma* interchangeably, although *doctrina* was preferred as an indication of Scriptural teachings, while *dogma* tended to be used particularly for referring to heretical teaching.⁷⁶⁴ In post-enlightenment Reformed Christianity, ‘dogma’ was defined particularly as ‘the formulated statements of the truth officially adopted by the church.’⁷⁶⁵ However, within the Dutch Reformed world there are diverging opinions as to what ‘dogma’ precisely is. For example, Daubanton and Bavinck disagreed as to whether official adoption by the church is essential to dogma (cf. 2.10.2.1). Further, De Boer has argued that dogmas can also exist outside the confessions, while Van Genderen and Velema are of the opinion that dogmas can only be found in the official creeds of a church.⁷⁶⁶ An authoritative encyclopaedia with a German background claims:

The term ‘dogma’, then, has three different senses: (1) in the singular, it signifies the epitome of the knowledge of faith disclosed in God’s revelation; (2) in the plural, it refers to doctrines authorized by the church; and (3) in either the singular or the plural, it can refer to an arbitrary and untested opinion.⁷⁶⁷

For my intents and purposes, it is sufficient to define ‘doctrine’ as ‘the articulation of a conviction’, generally against the background of an intention to teach this conviction. Scripture does not indicate explicitly that such articulation must be officially adopted (as happens with confessions) before it can be taught; apostolic authority was sufficient (1 John 1:1-4). Thus, from a Scriptural perspective, there is ‘doctrine’ outside ecclesiastically-fixed confessions.

3.2.2.2 DISTINCTIONS WITH RESPECT TO DOCTRINE

It is helpful at this stage to outline some distinctions with respect to doctrine and explore their implications. Attention will be paid to the ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ use of the term ‘doctrine’.

⁷⁵⁹ *WNT*, “leer (I)”; the emphasis is mine.—*WNT* explains that the verb ‘leeren’ originally meant ‘to cause to know’ (i.e. to teach).—In Dutch the verb ‘leren’ means both ‘to teach’ and ‘to learn’, and has two different etymological roots (see de Middle Dutch terms “leren” and “leernen”). See MNW, ‘leeren’ and ‘leernen’.

⁷⁶⁰ See Pareau, “Evangelische Opbouwing”, 774-782. He notes that *leer* can be understood as *onderwijzing* (instruction) or *leerstelsel* (system of doctrine). See further 2.7.2.7

⁷⁶¹ Dutch authors will at times use the German plural *dogmen*. The plural of *dogma* in Dutch is *dogmata* (in English ‘dogmas’ is preferred). Besides the term *dogma* the Dutch will also speak of *leerstelling* (doctrinal proposition) or *leerstuk* (point of doctrine).

⁷⁶² Luke 2:1; Acts 16:4; 17:7; Eph. 2:15; Col. 2:14. See Daubanton, “Inrichting”, 136-138. Daubanton notes that the Latin equivalents are *consultum* and *decretum*.

⁷⁶³ McGrath comments that with the conversion of Constantine and the Arian controversy “‘doctrine’ rapidly assumed the character of legally sanctioned ideology—a concept perhaps accurately designated ‘dogma’.” (McGrath, *Genesis of Doctrine*, 41).

⁷⁶⁴ Van 't Spijker, “Doctrina”; see also De Boer, “Geloof onder Woorden”, 72-81.

⁷⁶⁵ Berkhof, *Introduction*, 19. See Daubanton, “Inrichting”, 139; Van Genderen and Velema, *BGD*, 17.

⁷⁶⁶ Van Genderen and Velema, *BGD*, 19; De Boer, “Geloof onder Woorden”, 85-86.

⁷⁶⁷ *Enc. Chr.*, s.v. “dogma”, 864.

Further, a common misunderstanding is that ‘doctrine’ refers only to ontological realities; I will make clear that ethical prescriptions are also, by definition, ‘doctrines’. A term from Scripture that requires attention is ‘sound doctrine’. Finally, doctrines are sometimes classified according to their derivation and the degree of certainty attached to them: there are ‘doctrines’ and ‘*theologoumena*’. Sometimes reference is also made to ‘church doctrine’.

3.2.2.2.1 Objective and Subjective

Van Dale gives two basic uses for the term ‘*leer*’: the formulation of a teaching and the formulation of a conviction. These two may be considered the ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ use of the concept doctrine. For ‘doctrine’ in the sense of ‘something taught’ need not be personally appropriated, whereas ‘doctrine’ in the sense of ‘something held’ has by definition been personally appropriated. By way of illustration: a computer can ‘teach’ doctrine by displaying it on a screen and having the user take note of it, but it cannot ‘hold’ doctrine.

However, in an ecclesiastical context the two cannot really be separated from each other. For the church teaches what it believes and believes what it teaches. This implies that everything taught by the church is directly related to faith conviction.

I disagree with the Groningers (cf. 2.6.2.4) who argued that a Catechism is no more than an instructional aid, which cannot function as a confession that summarizes doctrine. Because it is an instructional aid in an ecclesiastical context, it also is a confession of faith.

I also disagree with the Apologists (cf. 2.7.2.8) who suggested that a church leader need not believe what he teaches, and that there is a sharp distinction between dogmatics and symbolics. I agree with the Groningers (cf. 2.5.2.5) that it would in fact be preposterous for someone in the church to teach on behalf of the church something of which he is not personally convinced.

3.2.2.2.2 Ontological Reality and Moral Obligation

Because ‘doctrine’ in the first instance means ‘teaching’ it should be noted that a doctrine can be a statement concerning an ontological reality or a statement concerning a moral obligation. The statements ‘God created heaven and earth’ and ‘You shall not steal’ are by definition both doctrines. In discussions on confessions, there exists at times a tendency to distinguish between doctrinal and ethical statements, and to emphasize the one over the other. For example, Groningers and Ethicals tended to emphasize statements concerning propriety while the traditionalist Reformed and Calvinists tend to emphasize statements concerning reality. It is rather curious to observe that confessional writings (with the exception of catechisms) tend to be summations of statements concerning ontological reality, and that ‘doctrinal statements’ seem to be more divisive than ‘ethical statements’ adopted by a church.⁷⁶⁸ In my opinion, the Reformed should be more aware that doctrines comprise both statements concerning ontological realities and moral obligation, and that both should be included in confessional statements. It would mean that confessional subscription impacts not only on one’s ‘doctrine’ but also on one’s ‘life’.

Volten’s observation that there are doctrines that express salvific truths and doctrines that express commandments (2.12.2.3) is thus well made.

3.2.2.2.3 Sound doctrine

In the pastoral epistles, one encounters four times the expression ἡ ὑγιαίνουσα διδασκαλία (the sound doctrine). It may be considered rather curious to characterize ‘teachings’ as ‘healthy’ rather than ‘true’ or ‘accurate’. It has been argued that the true meaning is ‘to make healthy’ as opposed to ‘to be healthy’.⁷⁶⁹ Sound doctrine is thus doctrine that gives a person a proper understanding of reality and functions as a proper guide for a godly walk of life.

⁷⁶⁸ I observe that Reformed dogmatics will often have a section on ‘dogmatics and the confession’ but Reformed ethics will not. This is rather curious since Reformed ethics make as much use of Reformed catechisms as Reformed dogmatics make use of Reformed confessions.

⁷⁶⁹ Bouma, *Timoteus en Titus*, 82.

3.2.2.2.4 *In Relation to Divine Revelation*

Individual doctrines can be classified according to how they relate to divine revelation. There are doctrines that are explicitly formulated in divine revelation (for example, the existence of God, the prohibition to steal). There are also doctrines that are implicit in divine revelation and derived by necessary consequence from it (for example, the existence of God in Three Persons, the prohibition on cloning). There are also conclusions drawn from Scripture that are warranted but not necessarily the only possibility (for example, the choice between infralapsarism and supralapsarism, the singing of free hymns during the public worship service). The last mentioned doctrines are technically referred to as *'theologoumena'* (singular: *theologoumenon*). These distinctions prove to be helpful in determining what should be included in confessions and what should not.⁷⁷⁰

3.2.2.2.5 *Doctrine officially taught by the church*

Of a different order are doctrines, of various origin, that are officially taught by the church by virtue of their being ecclesiastically fixed. Often this is referred to as 'dogma', but as the term is defined variously, I will refer to doctrine officially taught by the church as 'church doctrine'. One of the questions that arises in the process of fixing a confession is which types of doctrine can be and ought to be included in a confession, and in what manner such included doctrines are to be considered binding.

*The Liberation (2.10.2.2.7) and the 'buitenverband zaak' (2.14.2.1) have their origins in part in debates on what precisely may become doctrinally binding and what may not.*⁷⁷¹

3.2.2.3 SUMMARY

In short, *'leer'* or 'doctrine' is 'the articulation of a conviction', generally against the background of an intention to teach this conviction. For the sake of clarity, I have observed that 'doctrine' can be used both subjectively and objectively. I have also noted that ethical statements are, no less than doctrinal statements, doctrines, and should therefore be included in confessions. Doctrines are often classified according to their source: explicitly drawn from divine revelation, implicitly and absolutely drawn from divine revelation, and implicitly drawn from divine revelation (*theologoumena*). 'Church doctrine' is doctrine that has been officially adopted by the church, the question being which doctrines may become church doctrine.

3.2.3 FAITH AND DOCTRINE IN RELATION TO EACH OTHER

Confessions are described as expressions of faith and summations of doctrine. For some this is a dilemma. Is not 'faith' something subjective, something which 'I' do, and 'doctrine' something objective, something 'out there'? In my definition of doctrine as both objective and subjective, I have already implied that the two are related. Describing this relationship in detail will help answer the question how confessions can at the same time be articulations of faith and summations of doctrine.

That 'faith' and 'doctrine' are related is clear from the use of the two terms in Scripture. In 1 Tim. 4:6 the terms πίστις and διδασκαλία are used side by side in a way which suggests parallelism. Paul writes to Timothy that he is able to be "a good minister of Christ Jesus, *nourished in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine.*" (...ἐντρέφόμενος τοῖς λόγοις τῆς πίστεως καὶ τῆς καλῆς

⁷⁷⁰ Pelikan defines doctrine as "What the church of Jesus Christ believes, teaches, and confesses on the basis of the word of God: this is Christian doctrine", noting, though, that it is difficult to distinguish church doctrine from the theories of teachers (Pelikan, *Christian Tradition*, 1, 3). These 'theories of teachers' are designated 'theology' (as opposed to 'doctrine') by Campbell (Campbell, *Christian Confessions*, 2). What Pelikan refers to as the 'theories of teachers' and Campbell as 'theology' the Dutch refer to as *'theologoumena'*.

⁷⁷¹ In the North American context this point has led to the formation of the Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches.

διδασκαλίας). Commentaries are agreed that the two terms are used almost synonymously. The distinction between the two is variously described as “the substance of faith found in God’s Word and the formulation of faith by the church in doctrinal statements”, “the basic gospel message and the doctrinal teaching that comes out of it”, and “Christianity and the sum of its message, and the purposes of the words: to teach this message”.⁷⁷²

Reflecting on the meaning of the terms ‘faith’ and ‘doctrine’, and given the way they are used in 1 Tim. 4:6, it would seem that the link lies in the concept of ‘belief’. A ‘belief’ (article of faith) becomes a ‘doctrine’ when it is articulated, especially with a view to being passed on (taught). It is especially as *fides quae* that faith becomes synonymous with doctrine. One might say: faith is the conviction in the heart and doctrine is the conviction in the mouth (cf. Rom. 10:8,10 and BC art. 1).

At this stage the question is relevant as to which comes first: faith or doctrine? On the one hand, one cannot come to faith without being taught (Rom. 10:14). On the other hand, one cannot teach without believing (1John 1:1-4). It is important to realize that the starting point of the chain of faith lies with divine revelation. It is the communication of divine revelation that brings people to faith. Thus the doctrine of God (that which God teaches) stands at the beginning of it all: it begins with God’s Word. However, since faith is normally evoked by the Spirit through the use of human instruments, the faith of human teachers is a channel through which divine revelation often passes in order to be taught. It is on account of this process that faith precedes doctrine, doctrine being ‘the articulation of a conviction’. The end of the matter is that the issue cannot in fact be decided. Once the Word had become flesh, and all that had to be revealed had been revealed, a circular process came into being: doctrine (teaching) evokes faith and faith evokes doctrine (teaching).

Thus, faith and doctrine are related to each other in that when *fides quae* is expressed, faith has become doctrine. The substance of both is identical, the difference is the action. Faith is the substance believed and doctrine is the substance taught. This explains how confessions can at the same time be an articulation of faith and doctrine. There is no dilemma here.

3.2.4 FAITH AND DOCTRINE IN THE CHURCH

Being interested in the functioning of confessions in the church, and since confessions are an articulation of faith and doctrine, it is also necessary to look at how ‘faith’ and ‘doctrine’ function in the church. I will first review the two separately in their relationship to the church, and finally the combination in their relationship to the church.

3.2.4.1 FAITH IN THE CHURCH

The church is, by definition, the community of believers, the faith-community. Those who belong to the church share the same faith (Eph. 4:5 and 13); ‘faith’ can be called ‘our faith’ (1 John 5:4). The common element in the faith is that it is focused on the same person, Jesus Christ, and draws from the same message (Col. 1:4 and 23). While there are different measures of faith in the church (Rom. 12:3), this does not imply different convictions. In different circumstances, different convictions will be at the forefront of the church’s confessing. However, difference in emphasis does not imply rejection of a previously held conviction or a conviction held elsewhere with which a particular church has never been confronted.

‘Faith’ is thus a characteristic of the church: it is the communion of believers. This faith is both *fides qua* and *fides quae*. The faith is common to the members, not only in that they all believe, but also in the convictions that they individually hold.

⁷⁷² Bouma, *1-II Timotheus; Titus; Filemon (KV)*; Hendriksen, *Timothy and Titus*; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles (WBC)*; Knight III, *Pastoral Epistles (NIGTC)*; Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles (ICC)*. The quotes are from Bouma, Mounce and Knight III respectively.

3.2.4.2 DOCTRINE IN THE CHURCH

Scripture describes the church as the pillar and bulwark of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15). Most commentaries are agreed that the term ‘pillar’ is here to be considered in the sense of the modern ‘billboard’, and ‘bulwark’ is to be understood in the sense of ‘stronghold’.⁷⁷³ The church is thus called to broadcast and defend the truth. This is achieved through the continued proclamation of divine revelation. This proclamation is a form of teaching (Matt. 28:19) and thus the substance of the proclamation is by definition doctrine. Seen in this way, everything that is officially uttered on behalf of the church is by definition the doctrine of the church.

3.2.4.3 FAITH, DOCTRINE AND THE CHURCH

Faith is an inner conviction that results in trust and fidelity that can be brought to expression (3.2.1). Doctrine is the articulation of a conviction with a view to teaching it (3.2.2). Thus when faith is brought to expression in order to be taught, it can also be referred to as doctrine (3.2.3). Further, faith is a characteristic of the church, and doctrine is produced by the church (3.2.4.1-2). The question now is: how do these three—faith, doctrine, and church—relate to each other? This is a crucial question for my subject, since confessions are described as ‘confessions of faith’, ‘doctrinal standards’, and are fixed ‘ecclesiastically’.

Faith stands at the origin of the church for the church is formed of believers. Faith comes from hearing, preaching, teaching, i.e. doctrine. Initially the teaching of Jesus Christ formed a faith community (disciples), the church. This church in turn called others to faith, thus enlarging the church with more believers (Acts 2:42; 2 Tim. 2:2). Once the faith community is formed, a circle is set in motion: faith leads to teaching, teaching leads to faith, faith leads to teaching etc.

The church has chosen officially to formulate certain beliefs that form the core of its proclamation (cf. 3.3.5). This officially formulated set of beliefs is usually what is meant by ‘the doctrine of the church’. The church uses its doctrine as a check for those who teach in its name: what is taught on behalf of the church must accord with the doctrine of the church. Hence Paul writes that an elder must “hold fast the sure word as he has been taught” (Titus 1:9⁷⁷⁴; cf. 3.4.5.3).

One can then describe the relationship between faith, doctrine, and the church by the following course of events. Divine revelation is proclaimed and evokes faith. Faith is articulated by the church for the purpose of, among other things, passing it on by teaching. The product of this articulation is called ‘doctrine’. This doctrine is normative for those who teach in service of the church.

Bavinck (2.10.2.1) is justified in his objection against Daubanton’s understanding of symbolics and dogmatics. Symbolics as a descriptive discipline does not precede dogmatics as a reflective discipline. There is an interplay between the two, and divine revelation stands at the head of it all.

3.2.5 THE MUTABILITY AND MAINTENANCE OF FAITH AND DOCTRINE

As written documents, confessions have the tendency to fix—some have called it petrify—the teachings of the church, the articulations of its faith. The debates in the NHK between 1816 and 1951 concerned the precise meaning of the words ‘maintenance of their doctrine’ and the urge felt by many, liberal and conservative, to change elements of the confessing of the church. Underlying the question whether the confessions can be changed is the question whether the faith and doctrine of the church can be changed. Aspects relating to the mutability and maintenance of faith and doctrine will receive attention in this last section. I will first describe the immutability of divine revelation (3.2.5.1), then look at the mutability of faith and doctrine (3.2.5.2), and finally evaluate the phrase ‘maintenance of faith and doctrine’ to conclude that it is in fact inaccurate and even misleading (3.2.5.3).

⁷⁷³ See the commentaries listed in note 772.

⁷⁷⁴ See Bouma, *Timoteus en Titus*.

3.2.5.1 THE CONSISTENCY OF DIVINE REVELATION

The immutability of God (James 1:17) implies the consistency of divine revelation. God's Word never fails, it stands forever (Is. 40:8; 1 Pet. 1:25). That which God teaches, His 'doctrine', is consistent. This implies that the source for faith (and thus the ultimate source for human doctrine) is never contradictory.

In Scripture, it is clear that those who stand in the service of God are above all to be faithful to God's Word. They are not allowed to add to it or take from it. Kings were obligated to abide by God's law (Deut. 17:14-20). The people had to distinguish carefully between true and false prophets (Deut. 18:15-22). Priests had to take careful note of the instructions God had given (Lev. 10:1; 1 Sam. 2:26-36). In the church of the New Testament, elders and deacons had to be well acquainted with God's Word so that they might abide by it (Titus 1:9; 1 Tim. 3:9). Itinerant preachers had to preach God's truth and nothing else (Rev. 2:2). Those who stood in the service of God to pass on His Word, those who had a leading function in the Church, were bound to that Word of God. They were not allowed to add to it or detract from it (Rev. 22:18-19).

In short, divine revelation is consistent and must be kept or held to. Jude calls upon the church to contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude :3) and Paul calls upon the Galatians not to desert the teachings of the apostles (Gal. 1:8-9).

3.2.5.2 THE MUTABILITY OF FAITH AND DOCTRINE

Divine revelation is consistent. Does this consistency transfer itself as an attribute when the substance of divine revelation transfers to mankind to become faith and doctrine?

The passage of time makes clear that human understanding of and insight into divine revelation increases and decreases. While it is possible for mankind to know divine revelation (cf. 3.1.1.1.2), there is an element of incompleteness to the faith: what is known and proclaimed is not perfect. For individual persons and faith communities, there is also a growing in the faith and doctrine (1 Cor. 3:2-3; Heb. 5:11-14) and there can even be communal lapses from the faith (Gal. 1:7). Furthermore, faith waxes and wanes; one can believe and yet cry out for faith (Mark 9:24).

I have described the process of which confessing is a part as follows: divine revelation (doctrine) evokes faith in humans (the apostles) and humans pass on their insights in the form of doctrines to other humans, which evokes faith in them and so on. Because the faith of humans is mutable, human insights into divine revelation, articulated in doctrines, are by definition open to inconsistencies and imperfections, and are therefore by definition mutable. Only the source of faith and doctrine, divine revelation, is by definition consistent and unchanging.

Some, especially in the Traditionalist camp and in the more conservative circles of the Dutch Reformed tradition, have argued that the confessions ought to remain unchanged. For example, De Gier (2.14.2.10) wrote that those who seek to amend the confession place themselves under suspicion of teaching heterodoxy. However, such a position does not adequately reckon with the imperfection of man's faith and man's knowing. In fact, it may well be considered arrogant to hold that confessions, as articulations of faith and doctrine, ought to remain unchanged over time. Rev. 22:18-19 can never be appended to a confession.

On the other hand, it would be going too far to assume the need to change the confessions as did, for example, the Remonstrants and J. van Toorenenbergen. Some confessions have withstood the test of time, not by lying unused in a drawer, but by living in the hearts and mouths of believers. Articulations of faith have been penned with the blood of martyrs. It is the Holy Spirit who guides the church in the truth so that the church comes to confessing its faith. Mutability of the confession does not imply an errant or transient confession.

Rutgers van der Loeff (2.6.2.4) argued that the idea that confessions ought to be maintained unchanged stood in the way of scientific progress. The response of Traditionalists such as De Hoest—that progress was possible in the sense of adding proof texts for the doctrines—was naïve (2.6.2.7). The response of the Juridical Calvinists such as the Seven Gentlemen—that confessional documents prevent backsliding—was insufficiently developed (2.6.2.3). The mutability of faith and doctrine in the church implies not only that the church can grow in faith and

doctrine, but also that it can change, and even that something has to be removed because the church has said too much in the past. The point that should have been made in response to the Groningers is that those who believe they have come to new insights (e.g. on justification) should always confront themselves with what others have said on the matter in the past. A church cannot ignore the confessions in its endeavour to grow in faith-knowledge.

3.2.5.3 MAINTENANCE OF FAITH AND DOCTRINE?

In 1816, the NHK phrased part of the task of the church boards as ‘the maintenance of their doctrine.’ Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, pleas were made for the maintenance of faith and doctrine, where ‘their’ is a reference to the church (Christianity in general and the NHK in particular). The term ‘*handhaven*’ (‘maintenance’) is defined by Van Dale as “1. To preserve, to ensure that something or someone remains in the state in which he (it) finds himself (itself), to make sure that something is not violated; 2. Not to take back, not to retract.” The historical overview of the debate in the NHK makes clear that all understood it to mean preserving the doctrine of the NHK unchanged. However, in view of the fact that faith and doctrine are mutable, as opposed to being immutable or transient, can one speak of ‘maintenance’ here?

Scripture is overly clear on the fact that ‘the faith’ is to be maintained: Acts 14:22; Col. 1:23; 2:7; 1 Tim. 4:6; Titus 1:13; Jude :3. In these passages ‘the faith’ is the faith that the apostles articulated in their teaching. Moreover, the teaching in the churches may never deviate from what was originally taught by the apostles: 1 Cor. 4:17; Gal. 1:8-9; 2 Tim. 2:2; Titus 2:7.

The New Testament church was thus called upon to conform its faith and doctrine to the original faith and doctrine, as it was ‘once for all delivered to the saints’ (Jude :3). The norm is not the faith of the previous generation (tradition) but the faith of the apostles. The apostles commanded the churches to maintain the original apostolic faith.

This being the case, and given the mutability of faith and doctrine, it is impossible to speak of the *maintenance* of faith or doctrine, where faith and doctrine are the faith and doctrine of the church in the present. The faith and doctrine of the present generation is not to be *maintained*, for then it could form a second substance alongside Scripture (as it has done in the Roman Catholic Church in the form of tradition⁷⁷⁵). Instead, the faith and doctrine of the church is to be *continually conformed* to Scripture and the doctrine of Scripture is to be maintained. In the Calvinist tradition, the Reformed Church is *semper reformanda*, that which is to be continually re-formed. By definition, maintaining the doctrine of the church would be equivalent to maintaining the traditions of the church.

I hasten to point out that I speak here of the *mutability* of faith, doctrine and the confession. *Mutability* does not imply lack of faith in the confession or the idea that change every so many years is a necessity. My point is that one should not *a priori* conclude the correctness of the confession but *a posteriori*.

This being the case, the problem of the debate in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was in fact the phrase used in 1816 with respect to the confessions “the maintenance of their doctrine.” The task of the church is not to maintain its doctrine but God’s doctrine (Scripture). If something should be said with respect to the church’s doctrine, one would have to say that it is to be continually conformed to God’s doctrine (i.e. divine revelation, Scripture). This is not identical to the stance defended by J. van Toorenenbergen, who held that the confessions must be put on trial every three years during a general synod (2.9.2.5). It means no more than that the church cannot refuse to consider objections to and refinements of the confession.

Still further back, the problems began with the form of subscription adopted by GS Dordrecht 1618-19. Unlike the liturgical forms for baptism and the ordination of ministers, and of elders and deacons—which ask for agreement with the doctrine of Scripture—the form of subscription required agreement with the doctrine of the confessional statements. The phrasing could be improved here, along the lines of the liturgical forms (cf. 3.4.4.2 and 3.4.4.5).

⁷⁷⁵ Roman Catholic Church, *Catechism of the RCC*, art. 80-83.

Further, the implications of the foregoing are that in a doctrinal discipline case, it is not the doctrinal position of an individual as such that is at stake but the attitude and direction in which the individual wants to move.⁷⁷⁶ Is the individual serious about conforming his personal convictions (faith and doctrine) to God's teachings or not? This parallels discipline of life, which ought not to focus on the sin or misdeed as such but on whether the sinner hardens in sin or repents from sin and promises and shows betterment (cf. 3.4.8.5).

The objection raised against the delegates from Overijssel at the GS Dordrecht 1618-19 (2.2.2.4) touches this matter also. Confessional documents outline what the church believes Scripture to teach. In a doctrinal discipline case (such as the trial of Remonstrant teachings), the issue is what Scripture in fact teaches. At this point the confession itself is, implicitly, on trial. It is an authoritative but not dictatorial debating partner (cf. 3.4.8).

3.2.6 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have surveyed the concepts 'faith' and 'doctrine' as they stand in relation to the church and its confessing.

The term '*geloof*' ('faith' and 'belief') describes an attitude of trust as well as a substantive conviction. A distinction is frequently made between *fides qua*—'faith by which', the act of believing—and *fides quae*—'faith which', that which is believed. *Fides quae* can be articulated, and thus the faith of which confessional documents speak is of this nature.

The term '*leer*' ('doctrine') means in the first instance 'that which is taught', and over time this came to mean 'the conceptual expression of a religious faith'. An important distinction with respect to doctrine is its origin: is it taught directly by God (divine doctrine) or is it taught by man (church doctrine). It is important to remember that doctrines (teachings) can relate to ontological realities and moral obligations.

The concepts 'faith' and 'doctrine' relate to each other in that the doctrine taught is the faith believed, and the faith believed is the doctrine taught. Once God has spoken, the circle of faith evoking doctrine and doctrine evoking faith is begun. It is in this circle that confessional documents function.

Faith and doctrine relate to the church in that the church is comprised of those who share a common faith, and in that the church is called upon to teach God's truth. Confessional documents serve as an expression of the common faith and an articulation of what the church teaches.

The doctrine of God is consistent over time. But the faith of humans and thus the church waxes and wanes, insight increases and decreases; and with it the teaching of the church. It is therefore impossible to speak of the maintenance of the church's faith or the church's doctrine. What is to be maintained are the teachings of God, and the church is called upon *to conform* its faith and doctrine continually to divine doctrine. On this score, the Reformed tradition on confessions and confessional writings could do with some adjustments.

In short, 'faith' and 'doctrine' are not a dilemma in the church. Nor do they form a secondary authority in the church alongside divine revelation. The faith to be maintained and the doctrine to be taught is that of Scripture; the church is therefore called upon not to maintain its faith and doctrine but continually to conform its faith and doctrine to the norm of divine instruction: the faith and doctrine as described in Scripture. It is this latter faith and doctrine that alone is to be maintained.

⁷⁷⁶ See Phil. 3:12-16 and what Floor writes in his commentary.

3.3 Confessing and Confessions

Thus far the issues discussed in relation to confessing and confessional subscription have been of a theoretical nature. The historical survey made clear which factors played a role in discussions on the issue. In 3.1, I showed how underlying premises can have far reaching consequences for the issue. In 3.2, I explored concepts and phenomena directly related to confessing and subscription. Although I have indicated my own stance with respect to such premises, concepts and phenomena, I have not described what sort of consequences ensue from my own choices over the matter of confessional subscription. This will be subject matter of 3.3 and 3.4.

This chapter is concerned with the issue of confessing and confessions, and the following chapter will look at binding to confessions or subscription. The road I take in what follows is a more or less logical one. I begin by looking at the very basic question of what it is ‘to confess’ (3.3.1). Since ‘to confess’ is a transitive verb, the two matters that follow logically are the grammatical subject (who) and object (what) of confessing (3.3.2 and 3.3.3). As my interest lies not so much with confessing in general but with confessing that has been committed to writing, I look next at the step from ‘confessing’ to ‘confession’ (3.3.4). Having arrived at the phenomenon of confessional writings, I will explore various aspects of these documents: their functions, what confessions do (3.3.5), their hermeneutics, how confessions should be read (3.3.6), their relevance, whether confessions can become outdated (3.3.7), their authority, the importance of confessions (3.3.8), their lasting character, and finally whether confessions can be substantively changed (3.3.9). I will then conclude that the confessional heritage of the Dutch Reformed is inadequate on a number of ways. Hence I will close off by proposing new formats for confessing more suited to the functions confessing ought to fulfil in our time, and the process in which such new confessing might be given shape (3.3.10).

Once this overview is complete, I will be in a position to look at the final issue of this study: subscribing a confession (3.4).

3.3.1 WHAT IS ‘TO CONFESS’?

What is actually to be understood by the concept of ‘confession’? Or rather, staying within the confines of this study, what do the Dutch understand by the concept ‘*belijdenis*’? In this section, I will attempt to give an answer to this question. I will first review some lexical definitions of the etymological word groups centring on the Dutch verb ‘*belijden*’ and the nouns ‘*confessie*’ and ‘*professie*’. Because the use of this word-group in Dutch translations of Scripture adds a particular nuance to the concept, I will also review the underlying Hebrew and Greek terms.

The Dutch verb for ‘to confess’ is ‘*belijden*’.⁷⁷⁷ It is defined by *Van Dale* as “to admit publicly to a conviction of faith, to acknowledge to be an adherent thereof”.⁷⁷⁸ The corresponding noun is ‘*belijdenis*’ or ‘*geloofsbelijdenis*’.⁷⁷⁹ *Van Dale* defines the latter as:

- (1) declaration made, especially before an ecclesiastical authority, regarding one’s religious conviction,
- (2) a number of articles of faith in which a religious faith is completely or partially contained.⁷⁸⁰

⁷⁷⁷ *Van Dale* (s.v. “*belijden*”) suggests the term originally came from the Lithuanian ‘*klykti*’ meaning ‘to scream’. Though the Dutch do have a word-group etymologically related to the German ‘*bekennnis*’, in modern Dutch there is no relationship between these terms and ‘confessions’ in the sense that I will be studying the matter. The Dutch verb ‘*bekennen*’ means ‘to admit to’, generally with negative connotations (e.g. admit to a crime).

⁷⁷⁸ There are two further definitions: (2) to acknowledge something, especially something for which one is to be ashamed and (3) to acknowledge something, also favourable. Both the English ‘to confess’ and the Dutch ‘*belijden*’ is used in a religious context with respect to acknowledge of sin.

⁷⁷⁹ “*Geloof*” being the Dutch word for ‘faith’ or ‘belief’. *Van Dale* defines ‘*belijdenis*’ simply as: “(1) *geloofsbelijdenis* 1, (2) *geloofsbelijdenis* 2.”

The Dutch have also adopted into their language words based on the Latin terms ‘*confessio*’ and ‘*professio*’. The term ‘*confessie*’ relates specifically to the second definition of *geloofsbelijdenis*, and then primarily as an indicator of a written confession or a defined conviction of faith.⁷⁸¹ The term ‘*professie*’ is very occasionally used in literature on confessional subscription to refer specifically to the first definition of *geloofsbelijdenis*.⁷⁸² Interestingly, there is no Dutch adjective derived from the term *belijden*. As an adjective, the Dutch employ the term *confessioneel*. This implies that the Dutch ‘*confessie*’ is narrower in meaning than the English ‘confession’, whereas the Dutch ‘*confessioneel*’ and English ‘confessional’ are more or less equivalent.⁷⁸³

The problem of distinguishing between *geloofsbelijdenis* as a verbal noun (to indicate the act of confessing) and *geloofsbelijdenis* as a common noun (to indicate a written statement comprising a number of articles of faith) has continuously complicated discussions.⁷⁸⁴ Eventually Haitjema (2.10.2.3), and in his wake the NHK, GKN[s], and PKN, resolved this issue by employing the gerund of *belijden* to indicate the verbal noun, and restricting the usage of *belijdenis* to the written statement. Thus, besides the feminine *de belijdenis*, the neuter *het belijden* appears. In essence, this would seem to be an attempt to distinguish between *confessie* and *professie*.

This distinction, though itself useful, eventually began to lead a life of its own: the abstract belijden became ‘the real thing’ while the importance of the belijdenis was downplayed. Part of the reason for this would seem to be that belijden is easily linked to fides qua while belijdenis is more easily linked to fides quae, and there was, especially in NHK circles, an aversion to a fixed fides quae.

Although it is not always true that a term derives its meaning in Christian usage directly from its use in Scripture, the connotations that the verb ‘*belijden*’ has in Dutch translations of the Bible are frequently retained by the verb in more modern usage. Hence it is instructive to review the underlying Hebrew and Greek terms. In the Old Testament, *belijden* generally translates the Hebrew verb פָּתַח in the hiphil and hithpael. *BDB* defines the hiphil as “(1) give thanks, laud, praise; (2) confess”, and the hithpael as “(1) confess; (2) give thanks.” In the New Testament, *belijden* generally translates the Greek verb ὁμολογέω and its cognitive ἐξομολογέω. The noun *belijdenis* is also used as a translation for the noun ὁμολογία. The simple verb is translated by *Bauer* as “(1) promise, assure; (2) agree, admit; (3) confess; (4) declare publicly, acknowledge, confess; (5) praise.” Given the connections with verbs meaning “to praise”, I conclude that the act of

⁷⁸⁰ The same dual definition is given for the English term “confession” by *Webster’s*: “acknowledgement of belief or profession of faith, specifically (a) personal declaration of religious faith (b) a formal statement of doctrinal belief (as a creed or a catechism) ordinarily intended for public avowal by an individual, a group, a congregation, a synod, or a church.” Though Dutch authors will occasionally use the Latin term “*credo*” there is no Dutch equivalent for the English term “creed”. Both the ecumenical creeds and reformation confessions are referred to as *geloofsbelijdenissen*.

⁷⁸¹ Interestingly, the Belgic Confession is usually referred to as the *Nederlandse Geloofsbelijdenis* while other confessions are referred to with the term “*confessie*” as in *Westminster Confessie*, *Helvetische Confessie*.

⁷⁸² Though the term is listed by *Van Dale* it is not defined in relation to the field of confessions as I am studying it. For an example of this distinction between *confessie* and *professie* see Van Toorenenbergen, *Waartoe evangelisch-confessioneel?*, 21. Note that in the English language the terms “confession (of faith)” and “profession (of faith)” overlap.

⁷⁸³ *Van Dale*, s.vv. “*belijden*,” “*belijdenis*,” “*geloofsbelijdenis*,” “*confessie*,” “*professie*,” “*confessioneel*.”

⁷⁸⁴ Given the fact that the English term ‘confession’ can also have this double meaning, it is interesting to note that such a dilemma is not felt in English reflection on confessional subscription. Could this be because the term ‘profession’ is generally used for the verbal noun or is at least constantly lurking in the back of the English mind? Monsma and Van Dellen use the term ‘profession’ to explain the concept ‘confession’ when referring to the process of declaring one’s faith convictions with a view to admission to the Lord’s Supper (Van Dellen and Monsma, *CO Commentary*, 251) and the Canadian Reformed Churches speak of ‘public profession of faith’ where the Dutch speak of ‘*openbare geloofsbelijdenis*’.

confessing as presented by Scripture is not just a neutral “public stating of conviction” but also conveys a positive emotion with respect to that conviction.⁷⁸⁵

In discussions on the meaning of ‘confessing’, one often encounters the etymological argument that ὁμολογέω means ‘to say the same’ and that thus ‘to confess’ means ‘to say the same thing’ (e.g. Volten (2.12.2.3) and Graafland (2.14.2.4)). Such an etymological argument, however, is flawed. For a word can take on a meaning that is unrelated to its etymological root. Besides, the meaning ‘to say the same’ is very restricted and used only in conjunction with a dative.⁷⁸⁶

In short, the term ‘belijden’ (to confess) means to state a conviction of faith publicly. The term ‘geloofsbelijdenis’ (confession) can refer either to the act of confessing (in the sense of professing) or to the verbal record of such confessing (in the sense of a creed). The adjective ‘confessioneel’ (confessional) serves as an adjective for the cognate terms ‘belijden’ and ‘geloofsbelijdenis’, not specifically the Dutch term ‘confessie’. Finally, given its use in Scripture, ‘belijden’ is more than just a neutral ‘public stating of a conviction.’

3.3.2 THE (GRAMMATICAL) SUBJECT OF CONFESSING

Confessing is a verb. This raises the question, who is it that confesses? What is, grammatically speaking, the subject of the verb ‘to confess’? The historical survey makes clear that there have been differences of opinion on this. Doedes argued that the church confesses rather than the individual (2.8.2.10). Many in the NGK argued for a distinction between the confession of church office bearers and those who are not office bearers, while many in the GKN(v) argued that all members ought to appropriate and own the whole confessional package of the church (2.14.2.1). In this section I will look at both these issues: does the church or the individual confess (3.3.2.1), and what does it mean to say that the whole church confesses (3.3.2.2)? To some extent, the questions will remain unanswered, since the issue discussed in what follows ties in closely with the question of who is to be bound to the confession (cf. 3.4.5).

3.3.2.1 THE CHURCH OR THE INDIVIDUAL?

Scripture is quite clear on the subject of confessing. In Rom. 10:9, the singular is used, indicating that individuals indeed confess (cf. also 1 John 4:15). In the letter to the Hebrews, reference is made to a communal confession (Heb. 3:1; 4:14; cf. 2 Cor. 9:13). Scripture thus knows of individual confessing and communal confessing. There is no dilemma here. When the church confesses, the individual as member of the church confesses. When an individual confesses, the church consisting of individuals confesses. Thus the question as posed in the heading of this subsection is misleading.

A subsidiary question is whether the confessing of the church is to be considered the common set of beliefs held by all individuals in the church (as the Modernists would have it), or an entity entirely independent from individual confessions (as the Apologists argued), or the sum-total of individual confessions (as the Groningers suggested)?

In response to the Modernists, it is to be noted that the church is not a voluntary association of like-minded individuals (cf. 3.1.1.3.3.1). This implies that the norm for the confessing of the church does not lie with the faith of the members but in the Word of God. Minimizing the confessing of the church to what is common to all its members is thus the wrong approach. The point is not to conform the confessing of the church to the confessing of its members, but to conform the confessing of its members to the confessing of the church.

⁷⁸⁵ *BDB; GELNT.*—Other terms which are occasionally translated with *belijden* are זָכַר in the hiphil (to cause to remember), יָדַע in the qal (to know, acknowledge) and גָּלַל in the hiphil (to tell) in the Old Testament and ἀληθεύω (to profess the truth), ἐπαγγέλλομαι (to promise, to profess) and φάσκω (to assert, claim, profess) in the New Testament.—As with the English ‘to confess’ and Dutch ‘belijden’, so in Hebrew and Greek this concept is also used in connection with the acknowledgement of sin.—See H. E. Jacobs, “Confession” in *ISBE*.

⁷⁸⁶ Liddell and Scott, *G-E Lexicon*, ‘ὁμολογέω’.

In response to the Apologists, it is to be noted that the confessing of the church ought not to be strange to its members. The church is the community of believers, implying that its faith is their faith and their faith is its faith. The faith of the church cannot be abstracted from the faith of its members.

The Groningers, however, take the matter a step too far. Their stance implies that the confession of the church may contain contradictory elements. This, however, is improper. For again, the norm for the confessing of the church does not lie with its members but with God's Word.

The position of the PKN is in fact akin to that of the Groningers, as is evidenced by the holding of both Lutheran and Calvinistic confessions at the same time.

Groningers, Apologists and Modernists thus have in common that they neglect the vertical element in the confessing of the church. They seem oblivious to the fact that the confessing of the church brings to expression a divinely worked faith based on divine revelation.

Volten's plea that the confession should be the heartbeat of the congregation (2.12.2.3) is well made.

3.3.2.2 THE WHOLE CHURCH

Scripture does not indicate precisely who is meant by the community that confesses (cf. 3.3.2.1). The plural is used in letters addressed to a congregation as a whole (e.g. 2 Cor. 9:13). This would suggest that the congregation as a whole confesses. Romans 10:9 implies that only those who confess receive salvation. This would imply that those in the congregation who are able to confess are to confess. A distinction between, for example, clergy and laity or office bearers and non-office bearers is thus not in order (cf. also 3.4.5).

It is proper, however, to distinguish within the covenant community between those who have appropriated the confession and those who have not. The doctrine of the covenant makes clear that children of believing parents are incorporated into the church via the covenant.⁷⁸⁷ In Dutch Reformed circles it is common practice to speak of 'confessing members' and 'baptismal members'.⁷⁸⁸ The distinction between the two is that the former have publicly professed their faith; they have publicly stated that they "believe that the doctrine of Scripture, summarized in the confessions and taught in this Christian church, is the true and complete doctrine of salvation."⁷⁸⁹

Besides this cut-and-dried distinction, there is also a difference from person to person according to the individual capabilities to understand and appropriate the church's confession. Scripture speaks of different measures of faith (Rom. 12:3; cf. 3.2.1.2). Appropriation may be minimal (as in the case of those with mental disabilities). The point thus cannot be that every individual member of the church must hold all of the confessing of the church. The point is that an individual is to be within the boundaries of the confessing of the church. The faith that lives in the heart of the church member may not contradict the faith that the church confesses.

3.3.2.3 SUMMARY

In short, the grammatical subject of confessing is the church as the covenant community. There is in theory no dilemma between the confessing of the church and the confessing of its individual members. Neglecting the vertical element in confessing has led to aberrations in the characterization of the confessing of the church, distinguishing between the confessing of the church and the confessing of its members. The only sharp distinction that can legitimately be made is between those who shoulder their responsibility within the covenant and those who have not yet been able to shoulder that responsibility. Moreover, capability in appropriation should also play a role.

⁷⁸⁷ See Van Genderen and Velema, *BGD*, 516-517.

⁷⁸⁸ In some English speaking churches with a Dutch background one frequently encounters the term 'non-confessing' members or 'communicant' and 'non-communicant' members.

⁷⁸⁹ GKN(v), *Gereformeerde Kerkboek*, 520.

When I look at the direct object of ‘binding to confessions’ (3.4.5), I will explore this matter further.

3.3.3 THE (GRAMMATICAL) OBJECT OF CONFESSING

The verb ‘*belijden*’ is generally used transitively. This raises the question, how should one characterize or describe the direct object of confessing? Since confessional documents are often called ‘*geloofsbelijdenissen*’ (‘confessions of faith’) in Dutch, it is necessary to look at the concept ‘*geloof*’ (‘faith’). Since confessions of faith are often described as summaries or summations of ‘doctrine’, it is also necessary to look at this concept. Some—Groningers and Ethicals in particular—have argued that confessing should focus on subjective experiences, often referred to as ‘life’. Others—Modernists in particular—have argued that confessing should focus on objective statements of reality, often referred to as ‘truth’. These four concepts—faith, doctrine, life, and truth—have been considered descriptions of the grammatical object of ‘to confess’. The relationship between these concepts and ‘confessing’ is the subject matter of this subsection.

To a certain extent, the material to be discussed here is identical to that of chapter 3.2. There is a difference, however. In chapter 3.2 a study was made of ‘faith’ and ‘doctrine’, and how these function in relation to the church. This study was initiated by the observation that these issues frequently arise in discussions on confessions and confessional subscription. I argued that ‘faith’ and ‘doctrine’ are not mutually exclusive. I have further observed that ‘faith’, ‘doctrine’, and ‘church’ meet in the phenomenon of confessing. What I have not yet done is look at whether the connection ‘faith’ and ‘doctrine’ to confessing is justified. That is the intention of this subsection. Moreover, as the foregoing introductory paragraph makes clear, the scope is now somewhat broadened by the concepts ‘life’ and ‘truth’.

To these a fifth and sixth is yet to be added. For distinctions over doctrine have been made within the field of confessing, so that the question becomes whether all doctrine is the object of ecclesiastical confessing or of only what has been ecclesiastically fixed by some designated ‘dogma’. Approached from the other angle, the questions may be asked whether only and all doctrine that does not fall within the bounds of ecclesiastical confessing can be considered *theologoumena*.

I will first define the six concepts (3.3.3.1.). Then I will explain the distinctions between the concepts (3.3.3.2.). Armed with this information, I will explain the relationship between the concepts and confessing (3.3.3.3-5).

3.3.3.1 THE CONCEPTS DEFINED

The concepts ‘faith’ and ‘doctrine’ have already been described and defined in section 3.2. ‘Faith’ has there been defined as ‘an inner conviction resulting in trust and fidelity that can be brought to expression.’ ‘Doctrine’ has been defined as ‘the articulation of a conviction generally against the background of an intention to teach this conviction.’

In relation to doctrine, it is important to take note that, with respect to confessing, it has been argued that doctrine found in the confessional documents of the church must have been ecclesiastically fixed. Daubanton, Van Genderen and Velema, and De Boer reserved the term ‘dogma’ for such doctrine.⁷⁹⁰ This implies that the set of ‘dogma’ ought in theory to exclude the set of ‘*theologoumena*’, doctrines that are not explicitly stated in Scripture or derived by necessary consequence from it. A complicating factor in this distinction is that the set of ‘dogmata’ is generally determined empirically: whatever is ecclesiastically fixed is dogma. However, the set of ‘*theologoumena*’ is determined theoretically: whatever is debatable is a ‘*theologoumenon*’. It happens that a certain doctrine is considered by some a ‘*theologoumenon*’ while others disagree

⁷⁹⁰ Daubanton, "Inrichting", 18-182; Van Genderen and Velema, *BGD*, 19; De Boer, "Geloof onder Woorden": 85-86. In the field of dogmahistory it had become common practice to refer only to the doctrines dealt with by ecumenical councils as dogmata (see, for example, McGrath, *Genesis of Doctrine*, 10).

and therefore wish to have it made ‘dogma’.⁷⁹¹ Due to this process, *theologoumena* can in practice become dogmata.⁷⁹² As previously indicated, I will refer to ‘dogma’ as ‘church doctrine’.

The concept of ‘life’ is difficult to describe within the context of discussions on confessing. Groningers understood by it plain ethics: the way one conducts oneself in life. Their concern with the confessing of the church was that it was lacking in moral content. The Ethical understanding of ‘life’ is more difficult to express in words. They understood it in a more mystical sense: the way one experiences life or the drive in life, the spiritual aspect to life. Both Groningers and Ethicals manifested an anti-intellectual emphasis and were therefore more focussed on the fervour of one’s confessing than the substance of one’s confessing. For Groningers, communal confessing related directly to communal activity (e.g. mission work). Especially for Groningers, ‘reforming’ the church meant improving human solidarity. Within the Ethical camp one must yet distinguish between the position of Chantepie de la Saussaye and Gunning jr. On account of his ecclesiology, Chantepie de la Saussaye considered communal ‘life’ in the church an impossibility. Thus he tended towards individualism and inactivity where it concerned reforming the church (cf. 2.7.2.11 & 2.8.2.6). Gunning jr., however, did consider communal ‘life’ possible, but argued that such life could only manifest itself driven from within and not within the framework of regulations. Thus he preferred the so-called ‘medical’ or ‘spiritual’ route to reforming the church (cf. 2.8.2.3,8). Whichever way one reasons, the result is that the grammatical object of confessing is directly linked to the confessor and less to the substance of the confession. For the purposes of this study I define ‘life’ as ‘reality with the confessor’.

In contrast with ‘life’, the concept of ‘truth’ is to be understood epistemologically. ‘Truth’ is an ontological reality and confessing the ‘truth’ is to articulate ontological reality. Epistemologically stated, confessions would be expressions of ‘knowledge’. Supernaturalists, Modernists, and also Apologists and Traditionalists, saw the confessing of the church as articulation of the truth that was commonly known and held. They differed in their positions on how a truth-claim might be justifiably verified. In this approach, confessing is directly linked to the substance of the confessions and less to the confessor. For the purposes of this study, I define ‘truth’ as ‘the reality that is confessed’.

In short, for the purposes of this subsection:

Faith is an inner conviction that results in trust and fidelity and can be brought to expression.

Doctrine is the articulation of a conviction generally against the background of an intention to teach this conviction.

Church doctrine is ecclesiastically fixed doctrine

Theologoumena are all doctrines not stated explicitly in Scripture or drawn by necessary consequence from it and on which there thus may be difference of opinion.

Life is reality with the confessor.

Truth is the reality being confessed.

3.3.3.2 THE CONCEPTS DISTINGUISHED

In 3.3.3.1, the concepts have been systematically defined. However, the historical survey makes clear that such distinctions were far from clear in the debates. My analysis of the debates is that in the discussions, ‘faith’ or ‘doctrine’ and ‘life’ or ‘truth’ actually ran through each other, so that ‘faith’ and ‘life’ were considered identical, and ‘doctrine’ and ‘truth’ were considered identical. For some groups such identification made sense, but for others, especially Calvinists, it created a

⁷⁹¹ Within the Dutch tradition one may think of the debates between the Voetians and Cocceians during the eighteenth century.

⁷⁹² This may be illustrated by the debates of the first half of the twentieth century in the GKN which eventually led to doctrinal declarations, which, to the mind of the GKN(v), made *theologoumena* church doctrine.

quandary. In their search for an answer, they were constantly dividing along the line of faith/life and doctrine/truth, although within their camp then they felt more kinship with those with whose position they were often associated. In my judgement, this is because debates centred on dilemmas that were not dilemmas. Those who tried to break through such dilemmas—for example, Groen van Prinsterer en K. Schilder—were misunderstood either because their opponents did not understand that they were arguing the legitimacy of the dilemma rather than a side of the dilemma, or because there was disagreement on whether the dilemma was indeed false.

What made the debate even more complex is the fact that ‘faith’ and ‘truth’ are concepts not only with a religious-Scriptural background but also with an epistemological background. From the epistemological perspective, ‘faith’ had as its object the unverified statement of reality while ‘truth’ as the verified statement of reality was the object of knowledge. As the foregoing sentence illustrates, ‘faith’ and ‘truth’ are not of the same category. In the statement ‘I believe that x’, the concept ‘faith’ relates to ‘believe’. In the statement ‘I know that x’, the concept ‘truth’ relates to ‘x’. Thus the debate on confessing was often one about ‘faith’ and ‘knowledge’, or, if one will, ‘religion’ and ‘science’.⁷⁹³

It would go too far and serve little purpose in the context of my study to analyse the historical debates in detail on this point. May the following remarks suffice. The matter is so confusing that even participants were not clear on the stances they defended and the implications thereof. This has often been said of Ethicals, especially Chantepie de la Saussaye. But confusion was also present among the Calvinists. Thus Groen van Prinsterer’s position has in my opinion never been fully understood. Why was Da Costa constantly opposed to timeless fixation of confessional material (to the point that one historian considers him Remonstrant in his position), and why did Van Toorenenbergen go the course alone? What is one to think of the position defended by Heringa Ezn., Doedes and Van Oosterzee where, in the first instance, the object of confessing is identical to that of Calvinists though closer inspection reveals that on account of the road taken to confessing, the substance of this object is not fixed? These are all questions to which the answer lies, at least in part, in how these various persons characterized the object of confessing.

It is my conviction that many debates on confessing are in fact troubled by a failure to define terms and to distinguish concepts from each other. The confusion is understandable within the historical context of post-Enlightenment thinking—Hegelian and Kantian epistemologies spilling over into (philosophical) positivism, then modernism (and now postmodernism)—and this in combination with the increasing interest in scientific endeavour. However, this confusion ought not to continue in our time. Those debating the issue of confessing today should therefore be fully aware of the confusion that has troubled the debate and seek to rise above it.

In the following three subsections I wish to look at the six concepts noted in 3.3.3.1 and the dilemmas they have been thought to pose.

3.3.3.3 “FAITH” AND “DOCTRINE”

‘Faith’ is an inner conviction that can be brought to expression, and ‘doctrine’ is the articulation of a conviction generally against the background of an intention to teach this conviction. In 3.2, I already concluded that ‘faith’ and ‘doctrine’ share a common territory and thus need not pose a dilemma.

A lexical study of the grammatical objects of the concept of confessing in Scripture (ὁμολογέω and cognates) supports this. Such a study makes clear that both ‘faith’ and ‘doctrine’ can serve as grammatical object for confessing.

In Romans 10:9 and 10 the term confess has as its object ‘the Lord Jesus’, and is linked to the verb ‘to believe’. This is a clear example of ‘faith’ (trust in a person) serving as the grammatical object for ‘to confess’.

⁷⁹³ See also 3.1.2.2.

In Acts 23:8 it is noted that Sadducees deny the resurrection and the existence of angels and spirits, but that Pharisees *confess* both. This is a clear example of a ‘doctrine’ serving as the grammatical object for ‘to confess’.

At times it is not clear whether the object is ‘faith’ or ‘doctrine’, both would be possible.

An example is Heb. 3:1, which speaks of “the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus.” This confessing is an expression of trust in Christ Jesus, but it is also an expression of the reality that Christ is our Apostle and High Priest.

This illustrates that when it comes to confessing, ‘faith’ and ‘doctrine’, though distinguishable, do not form a dilemma. The conclusion is warranted that both ‘faith’ and ‘doctrine’ can be the grammatical object of confessing. In fact, in view of the argument in 3.2, I would suggest that all confessed faith is doctrine and all confessed doctrine is faith.

In short, the grammatical object of ecclesiastical confessing may be characterized as both ‘faith’ and ‘doctrine’.

The dilemma is possibly caused by the fact that both ‘faith’ and ‘doctrine’ are understood as being seated in the mind. There is too little attention paid towards the fact that faith is a matter of the heart also, and that one teaches a faith-article—the term ‘to teach’ relates to the term ‘doctrine’—on account of one’s conviction, which is also a matter of the heart.

3.3.3.4 ‘CHURCH DOCTRINE’ AND ‘*THEOLOGOUMENA*’

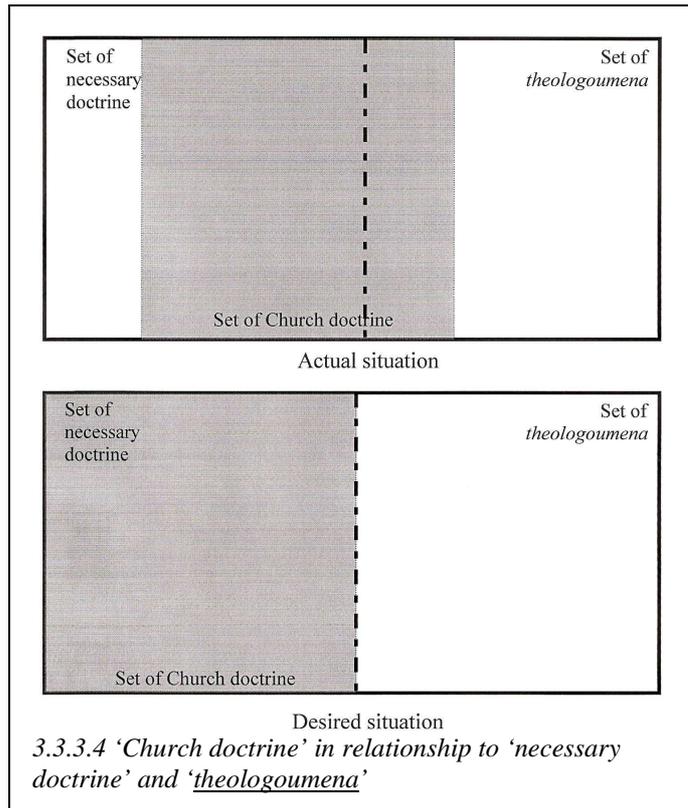
Next I wish to look at how the grammatical object of ecclesiastical confessing might be further characterized if considered as ‘doctrine’. I will consider the concepts of ‘church doctrine’ and ‘*theologoumenon*’ as previously defined. In advance, I note that the consequences of conclusions drawn in the following will not be immediately apparent. This is because the conclusions drawn here (to the extent that they can be drawn) affect the phenomenon confessing in combination with other positions. However, it is important to perform the following exercise. It forms part of the endeavour to answer questions such as ‘is all doctrine in confessional statements normative for one’s personal faith and heartfelt convictions?’; ‘is all doctrine not found in confessional statements an issue one can disagree on?’; and ‘should all confessional documents in all churches in all regions and cultures in all times be identical?’

Phenomenological study makes clear that the set of all doctrine is larger than the set of doctrine found in the confessions. It has been argued that the doctrine of ecclesiastical confessing is church doctrine by definition. It has also been argued that *theologoumena* ought to be excluded from the set of doctrine found in the confessions (e.g. 2.10.2.2.5-6). One may thus approach the further characterization of ‘doctrine’ from two angles. One may ask how the concept of ‘church doctrine’ relates to the grammatical object of ecclesiastical confessing. One may also ask how the concept of ‘*theologoumenon*’ relates to the grammatical object of ecclesiastical confessing.

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I emphasize that these are two distinct approaches. I have defined church doctrine as ‘ecclesiastically fixed doctrine’ and *theologoumenon* as ‘all doctrine not stated explicitly in Scripture or drawn by necessary consequence from it and on which there thus may be difference of opinion.’ The two terms are not each other’s opposites, they are not mutually exclusive. If one holds to the conviction that confessions should only include ‘all that is necessary for a Christian to believe’, a confession ought not to include *theologoumena*. However, in practice a confession may well contain *theologoumena*. I have attempted to illustrate this in the adjoining diagrams.

An example of a possible theologoumenon is the doctrine of the duties of the state with respect to the church and the gospel. Both in the tradition of the Belgic Confession and the Westminster Confession there has been much debate on what properly belongs here. It has even resulted in differing versions of both confessions and exemptions to subscription on this point.



This has certain implications. Ecclesiastical confessing is by definition ecclesiastically fixed and comprises doctrine. Church doctrine is by definition ecclesiastically fixed doctrine. All doctrine found in ecclesiastical confessing may be described as church doctrine. A confessionalized *theologoumenon* is thus, by definition, also church doctrine.

A consequence is that inclusion of a doctrine in a confession does not necessarily mean it is not a theologoumenon. This, in turn, implies that ecclesiastical confessing can never serve as the absolute norm for ‘necessary’ doctrine. At the most, ecclesiastical confessing contains what is considered to be ‘necessary’ doctrine.

Then there is the second approach: ought not ecclesiastical confessing to exclude all *theologoumena*? At this point of my study I cannot deal fully with this. For the answer depends on the function that ecclesiastical confessing fulfils, and the authority it comes with. In following chapters it will become clear that this is one of the great problems with respect to confessing: it has even to an extent resulted in different layers in ecclesiastical confessing.

At this stage the following can be said. From a practical perspective, it would seem that the line between church doctrines and *theologoumena* is not easily drawn. It is like the line between day and night: everybody knows the difference, but who is to say when day breaks and night falls? It is probably this that has led to expressions such as ‘fundamental doctrines’ (cf. 3.3.4.3).

In short, if one defines ‘church doctrine’ as ‘ecclesiastically fixed doctrine’ then the grammatical object of ecclesiastical confessing may be designated ‘church doctrine’. As to the relationship between ecclesiastical confessing and *theologoumena*, this is dependent on factors that have yet to be reviewed.

Overall, it means that I have only been able to state the obvious, though one may wonder how obvious this is in the heat of debate. This subsection has made clear that one not should not seek answers in the definition of the grammatical object of confessing to questions such as those posed in the introduction of this section. I will return to the issue at other points.

3.3.3.5 'LIFE' AND 'TRUTH'

I finally turn to the matter of 'life' and 'truth'. Life is 'reality with the confessor'. Truth is 'the reality that is confessed'.

There are two approaches in this debate. Debates between Groningers and Modernists well illustrate the first approach. The basic issue here is whether Christianity is a matter of ethics or knowledge, a matter of what one does or what one knows.

In response, Scripture makes clear that this is a false dilemma. James writes that faith without works is dead (James 2:17). John writes that we are to 'practise' the truth (1 John 1:6). There is no dilemma here, nor priority. The Christian is called upon to believe (know) and to act in accordance with his faith. Thus confessing has as its object not only statements concerning ontological reality but also statements concerning moral obligations.

One might cautiously suggest that the concrete confessions (excluding catechisms) have served to fuel the idea that 'confessions' are statements of truth. Even today it is common in orthodox Reformed churches to distinguish between 'doctrinal statements' and 'ethical statements'. The distinction—from the perspective of 'confessing'—is not legitimate. 'Ethical statements' are, by definition, also 'doctrinal statements'. It would be appropriate if, in the course of developing the confessing of the church, more attention were paid to confessional statements of an ethical nature.

The second approach is more complex. It is best illustrated by the interactions between Ethicals, Calvinists, and Apologists. It has a more epistemological hue, since 'life' is considered the experience of 'faith' and is contrasted with intellectual 'truth'. In some ways it might even be considered the juxtaposing of *fides qua* and *fides quae*. Those defending 'life' as the object of confessing—Ethicals, medical Calvinists, evangelical-confessionals and evangelical-reformed (e.g. NGK)—did not deny the substantive side to the object of confessing but had a tendency to make this substance less of a priority. Those defending 'truth' as the object of confessing—Apologists, juridical Calvinists and the rational-reformed (e.g. GKN(v))—did not deny the experiential side to the object of confessing but had a tendency to make this experiential side less of a priority. In battling each other, there was a tendency to caricature the opponent's position so that 'less of a priority' was presented as 'neglect'. Thus Ethicals were accused of 'neglecting' the substance of confessing, and Apologists and many Calvinists were accused of 'neglecting' the experience of faith. Men like Groen van Prinsterer and K. Schilder attempted to walk a middle road, which meant that they became somewhat estranged from the debate and were misunderstood, but yet could be used by subsequent debaters in support of both sides. With Groen and Schilder, I believe that 'life' and 'truth' are not contrasts but coexist and, at times, even merge to become more or less one. Confessing is not *just* a matter of intellectual assent nor *just* a matter of expressing inner experiences. Nor is it a matter of prioritizing the one over the other. Confessing is the articulation of life experienced as it really (truly) should be, and of the truth as one experiences it. Confessing is a matter of the mind and of the heart together.

Confessing 'Jesus is Lord' is not just the (cold) acknowledgement of Christ's lordship nor just the (fuzzy) expression of how one experiences Christ in one's life. It is both at the same time: a statement of reality (no one is Lord but Jesus) and a statement of experience (no one rules in my life but Jesus).

In short, where 'life' and 'truth' are contrasted as 'ethics' and 'knowledge', the dilemma is false. Both ethics and knowledge, both the activity of the mind and of the hands, can form the grammatical object of confessing. Where 'life' and 'truth' are contrasted as 'experience' and 'knowledge,' the dilemma is also false. The grammatical object of confessing has both experiential as well as intellectual implications.

3.3.3.6 CONCLUSION

I conclude that discussions on the grammatical object of confessing have unnecessarily troubled the debates to no purpose. The problem with this is not that there are various positions from which to choose, but that there are emphases that ought not to be played out against each other. The grammatical object of confessing is both faith and doctrine, it is both life and truth. The manner in

which these are present in confessions depends on the circumstances. It would seem that the balance differs from period to period. Because confessions tend to remain fixed, affinity for the confessions fluctuates accordingly.

Furthermore, by strict definition, the object of confessing is church doctrine. Whether *theologoumena* can be its object is a matter dependent on factors yet to be discussed. However, matters have been discussed that indicate that a line between dogmata and *theologoumena* cannot be easily drawn. This implies that confessions cannot be elevated above all scrutiny; they are not *by definition* perfect. I will return to this matter in sections that follow.

3.3.4 FROM CONFESSING TO CONFESSION

Thus far I have been speaking of confessing in an abstract sense, and for that reason have tended to use the verbal noun ‘confessing’ as opposed to the nominal reference ‘confession’. However, when the act of confessing has taken place, there is the product, the confession. In this subsection, I wish to review various aspects related to the process in which ‘confessing’ becomes ‘confession’, generally (though not exclusively) to be equated with a ‘confessional document’. First I will pay attention to how ‘confessing’ might be characterized (3.3.4.1). Next I look at actually giving form to one’s confessing (3.3.4.2). Finally, various aspects that might be identified within a confession are reviewed (3.3.4.3).

3.3.4.1 CHARACTERISATIONS OF CONFESSING

All kinds of images have been used to describe the act of confessing. These suggest that it can serve a wide variety of ends and indicate that there are possibly a large number of varying and even opposing opinions on the precise character of confessing and thus confessional writings.

The characterization of confessing can be classified into two types. A first type of characterization focuses on the substance of confessing, confessing in its more abstract sense. The second type of characterization looks at the usage or purpose of confessing, confessing in relation to its functioning. Hence, the first will have my attention at this stage (3.3.4.1.1) while the second will be outlined when the functions of confessions are being studied (cf. 3.3.5.1.1). An evaluation will follow the description of the characterizations (3.3.4.1.2).

3.3.4.1.1 Characterisation According to Substance

Characterization of confessing according to its substance comes primarily in two forms.

A first way of characterizing confessing according to its substance is to view it from the perspective of the confessor. Some authors describe confessing as **repetition** or even **echo (rehearsing)** of God’s Word. Others describe confessing as **amen** to⁷⁹⁴ (i.e. affirmation of) divine revelation. There is a slight distinction between these two, which can become a contrast through overemphasis. When in reflection confessing is seen as an echo of God’s Word, confessing is seen as a mirror of God’s Word, and the subjective element of the confessor could be minimized. When in reflection confessing is understood as an ‘amen’ to God’s Word, it is primarily seen as man’s response to divine revelation, and the objective element of the contents of confessing could be minimized. The distinction may seem minimal, but there have been debates in which the synthesis of these two has been disputed (e.g. 2.6.2.6-7 and 2.11.2.4).

Another way of characterizing confessing according to its substance is to look objectively at the material being confessed. Some authors give the impression of considering confessing to be an **exhaustive set** of articles of faith necessary unto salvation.⁷⁹⁵ Most authors consider confessing to

⁷⁹⁴ The Dutch frequently express ‘agreement with’ with the verb *beamen* (even in non-religious contexts); the verb literally means “to say amen to”.

⁷⁹⁵ I write ‘give the impression’ because no author clearly states this. It depends on how one reads expressions like “confessions contain the complete doctrine of salvation” and “confessions are to be maintained in every point of doctrine without distinction.” (E.g. Den Hoest, *Noodzaakelijke Aanwijzing*, 22-4; see Polman, *NGB*, 1:38.) I have

be a **summary** of articles of faith.⁷⁹⁶ This could then be a summary of what the church teaches, a summary of what Scripture teaches, or a summary of what one ought to believe to be saved, or a mixture of various types of articles. The idea of confessing being an ‘exhaustive list’ leaves little room for reduction or expansion of confessing; the characterization of confessing as “summary” is less restrictive.

3.3.4.1.2 Evaluation

Is confessing a repeating of Scripture or a response to Scripture? Confessing is part of the following process: God speaks and man listens, man believes, and finally man confesses. Both that which God speaks and that which man believes will shape the substance of confessing. One cannot separate the objective and subjective elements in confessing: they are the two sides to the same coin. From the perspective of the object, and in light of what has already been said about the object of confessing (3.3.3), it will be clear that the confessor will endeavour to echo divine revelation in his confessing. The extent to which and accuracy with which confessing may be considered to repeat divine revelation is in fact dependent on the confessor. In answer to the question, one may thus state: confessing is a response to Scripture seeking to repeat Scripture. This implies that confessing is certainly not the echo—that is to say, identical rehearsing—of Scripture.

Thus by definition, confessing is not the repetition of Scripture. Hence its authority can never equal that of Scripture. The arguments that confessions have authority because they repeat Scripture and that confessions lack authority because they are (no more than) a human reaction to divine revelation both differentiate insufficiently. On the one hand, one has to take into account that confessions can misrepresent Scripture, on the other hand, the earnest endeavour to repeat divine revelation should not be neglected.

Saying that confessing is not the repetition of Scripture also undermines the validity of the etymological argument that confessing (ὁμολογέω) is “to say the same”.

The point made here further clarifies that the emphasis should not lie on the maintenance of confessions but on the conformance of confessing to its source (cf. 3.1.1.3.4.1).

Is confessing the enumeration of an exhaustive set of articles of faith or is it just a summary? For either to be true, the confessor must have an overall understanding and comprehensive insight into divine revelation. However, we do not have such an overall and comprehensive insight. Confessions can thus never be considered to repeat all that is contained in divine revelation. At most, one can say that confessing is the full list or a summary of all that the church understands at this moment to be necessary for faith.

For a long time, the doctrine of justification was not part of the confessional material of the church. It only became such during the Great Reformation. Theoretically speaking, it is thus possible that there are doctrines not yet belonging to the confessional material of the church that should belong there. (In the Dutch tradition of confessions, more could certainly be said on the doctrine of marriage.)

It would seem that the phrasing of answer 22 in the Heidelberg Catechism raises the question as to the ‘summary’ character of the confession. The question is asked: “what then must a Christian believe?” The answer given is: “All that is promised us in the gospel, which the articles of our catholic and undoubted Christian faith teach us *in a summary*.” The German original here reads ‘*in einer Summa*’, the first Dutch translation has ‘*in eener summa*’, later ‘*in hoofdsom*’,⁷⁹⁷ and an accredited English translation ‘*in sum*’.⁷⁹⁸ Such terms suggest no more than that confessing contains the *main points* of the promises in the gospel. It is interesting to note that that first Latin

become convinced that, in general, the characterization that confessions are “exhaustive lists” is a straw man created by opponents to strict maintenance of confessions.

⁷⁹⁶ For example, the Heidelberg Catechism considers the Apostles’ Creed to be a ‘summary of the Gospel’ (q&a 22). For a discussion of confessional writings as ‘summaries’ see Kamphuis, “Geloofszekerheid en Binding”, 137.

⁷⁹⁷ *Van Dale* (s.v. “*hoofdsom*”) characterizes this word in this usage as ‘theological’ and ‘obsolete’.

⁷⁹⁸ See Bakhuisen van den Brink, *De Nederlandse Belijdenisgeschriften*, 162-163 and Schaff, *Creeeds of Christendom*, 3:314.

version reads '*quorum summa in symbolo ... breviter comprehenditur*' ('the main substance of which is contained briefly in the symbol'). I therefore suggest that such phrases as 'brief understanding',⁷⁹⁹ and 'main substance' best describe the contents of a confession in its relation to 'all that is promised in the gospel'. One may argue that the confession ought to contain 'all' that Christ taught us (Matt. 20:20), the 'full counsel of God' (Acts 20:27).

*Along similar lines, I also doubt whether the Presbyterian phrase 'system of doctrine' is accurate. For the term 'system' suggests an understanding of the whole in all its connected parts. In Dutch Calvinist circles, dogmatic reflection has always shown a preference for Melancthon's loci system: presenting the data and the connections understood without necessarily attempting to systematize the whole of doctrine.*⁸⁰⁰

There is merit to Severijn's consideration (2.11.2.4) that confessions ought not to be considered summaries (compendia) of main truths. One indeed runs the risk of rationalizing faith and confessing.

3.3.4.1.3 Summary

It has been a point of debate whether confessing should be seen as a repetition of Scripture or a response to Scripture. In my opinion, the dilemma is false: confessing is a response to Scripture that seeks to repeat Scripture. Confessing has also been variously characterized as presenting an exhaustive list of necessary doctrines or a summary of divine revelation. I hold that both characterizations fail since they both suggest that the confessor has a total overview of the source of confessing. It is more appropriate to characterize confessing as articulation of the 'main substance' of divine revelation.

3.3.4.2 GIVING FORM TO ONE'S CONFESSING

When the confessor confesses, the confession is born. Such confessions come in all shapes and sizes. Some are spontaneous verbal statements, others are carefully constructed written declarations. There are short and long confessions. There are confessions that are born in an hour of need, and confessions that are the product of lengthy study and many meetings. Some confessions are written by one person, and some by a synod of learned persons. Certain documents are called 'confessions', but 'confessing' is not limited to such documents. How does confessing take shape? That will be the focus of this subsection.

I will first present an empirical overview of types of confessing (3.3.4.2.1), then reflect on the existence of 'layers' in confessing (3.3.4.2.2), and finally look at some specific questions relating the passage from act ('confessing') to product ('confession') (3.3.4.2.3).

3.3.4.2.1 Types of Confessing

There are all sorts of documents for confessing. We speak of symbols, confessions of faith, catechisms, canons, and doctrinal declarations as having clear, confessional content. However, liturgical forms also tend to contain confessional material, as do hymns and sermons. In what follows, I will present an overview of different types of confessing.

The term **symbol** is used in two ways. It can refer to all confessional writings or creeds or, more specifically, to creeds produced in the early church as opposed to the Reformation and later creeds.⁸⁰¹ For Ursinus, the distinction was more than a historical one. He indicated that the age of the ecumenical creeds and the fact that they had remained unchanged gave them extra value over and above the confessions produced in his lifetime. It has been argued that symbols are intended to distinguish Christianity from other religions (cf. 2.14.2.2). Interestingly, in the Dutch language the term '*symbol*' is primarily academic, and the ecumenical creeds are usually referred to as

⁷⁹⁹ See Vermeer, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus*, 1:140 who uses the term '*kort begrip*'.

⁸⁰⁰ See Van Genderen and Velema, *BGD*, 27.

⁸⁰¹ For the former, Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 1:1-2. For the latter, Ursinus as noted by Polman, *NGB*, 1:74 (see Van Genderen, *Reformatiorische Belijdenis*, 20).

'*geloofsbelijdenissen*'. The Dutch Reformed have three such creeds: the Apostles' Creed or Twelve Articles of Faith, the Nicene Creed (strictly speaking, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed), and the Athanasian Creed or Quicumque.

The 'proper' **confessions of faith**, in Dutch '*confessies*' or '*geloofsbelijdenissen*', are expositions of doctrine consisting of a number of articles. Generally, these articles are intended to present a more or less complete survey of the characteristic teachings of a particular church. Most confessions of faith originated as apologies for third parties. They were often written by individuals and subsequently adopted by churches as expressions of their faith. Most Reformed confessions of faith date to the time of the Reformation. Of the confessional writings functioning in Dutch Reformed churches, the Belgic Confession of Faith belongs to this category.⁸⁰²

Feeling the need to instruct the populace, particularly children, in the truths of Scripture, many instructional aids called **catechisms** were written by individuals and churches. Some of these gained confessional status when their use was encouraged or even mandated by ecclesiastical assemblies. Characteristic for these confessional writings is their most common format: question and answer. This encouraged rote learning of answers to the basic questions of the faith.⁸⁰³ Originally, Dutch Reformed churches made use of two catechisms: a Dutch translation of the Heidelberg Catechism written on the orders of Frederik III, ruler in the German State the Palatinate,⁸⁰⁴ and the French Catechism of Geneva written by John Calvin.⁸⁰⁵ Besides these two catechisms, the Dutch made much use of the *Kort Begrip*, (Compendium). This was a catechism officially adopted by the church council of Middelburg as a standard for examination prior to the admittance of persons as members in full standing. The Synod of Dordrecht encouraged the use of the Compendium when the Heidelberg Catechism was considered too broad. In its contents, the Compendium is essentially identical to the Heidelberg Catechism. The Compendium never achieved official confessional status.⁸⁰⁶ Because catechisms were written as instructional aids, their confessional quality has been drawn into question by some (e.g. cf. 2.5.2.5).

Sometimes distinguished from confessions of faith are **canons** of faith. These are confessions that deal specifically with a number of doctrines and often consist of an exposition of a doctrine followed by a refutation of heresies. In 1618-19, the Arminian Controversy was dealt with by the Dutch Synod of Dordrecht with the involvement of a large number of foreign Protestants. This resulted in the Canons of Dort.⁸⁰⁷ In Dutch, the Canons of Dort are referred to as the *Dordtse Leerregels* (Teaching Guidelines of Dort). The name could be understood to indicate that this confession was for those who taught in the church. The confessional status of the Canons of Dort has been disputed, especially during the nineteenth century (cf. 2.5.2.5; 2.9.2.5-6). Besides the Canons of Dort, mention should be made of the Walcheren Articles. This five-article confession dealing with certain teachings of Roëll, Bekker, and Vlak was drawn up and adopted by Classis Walcheren in 1693. Subscription to these articles was in force in this classis until 1816. Their confessional status has been disputed.⁸⁰⁸

⁸⁰² On the Belgic Confession of Faith see Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:343-436. Worthwhile is also: P. Y. De Jong, *Witness*.

⁸⁰³ See the Greek term *κατηχέω* 'to resound'. Note that not all catechisms follow the question/answer format, e.g. Calvin's catechism of 1537 (with thanks to G. van Rongen for pointing this out).

⁸⁰⁴ On the Heidelberg Catechism see Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:307-355; Noll, *Confessions and Catechisms*, 133-136. Worthwhile is also: Hoeksema, *Triple Knowledge*.

⁸⁰⁵ The United Netherlands was bilingual, with Dutch and French as commonly spoken languages. After the Napoleonic era and even after the secession of Belgium French remained an official language for a long time.

⁸⁰⁶ See Biesterveld and Hoekstra, *Het Gereformeerde Kerkboek*, 269-274; Wielenga, *Het noodig weten*; and Van Rongen, *Briefing from Four Cities*, 36-37.

⁸⁰⁷ On the Canons of Dort see Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:550-597; Worthwhile also is: Hoeksema, *Voice*.

⁸⁰⁸ The preamble to these article states that they are not intended to be 'some new form to be subscribed' which the classis considered 'neither necessary nor advisable' but rather a 'further application of the old forms of unity to

Systematic Part

The various publications of the Canons of Dort can be interpreted to tell the story of how these documents were seen. Forewords in publications continually pointed out how scarce copies were, and during the eighteenth century, upon the initiative of Classis Appingedam, an abridged version was produced in an attempt to have publishers include it in the church service book. It was not until the 1830s that the Canons became widely available.⁸⁰⁹

In view of a particular situation, a church may decide to issue an official **doctrinal declaration**. Such a statement is usually drawn up by a synod and is in form much like a single article from a confession of faith or a canon. The confessional status (and subscriptional value) of such statements is disputed. From Dutch Reformed circles of the nineteenth and twentieth century the following doctrinal declarations may be noted: the decision of GS Leiden 1857 (CAGK) to be subscribed by theological professors, the Pacification Formula of 1905 (GKN), the Doctrinal Decision of 1926 (GKN), the Doctrinal Declarations of 1931 and 1945 (GG), the Doctrinal Pronouncements of 1942 (GKN) and the Replacement Formula of 1946 (GKN[s]).⁸¹⁰

Because of similarity in form or origin, confessions are often classified into groups. Thus Presbyterians will refer to the Westminster Confession, the Shorter Catechism and the Larger Catechism as the Westminster Standards. The Dutch likewise group their confessions. The three symbols are generally referred to as the ‘ecumenical’ or ‘general confessions of faith’ (*oecumenische* or *algemene geloofsbelijdenissen*). The three Reformation confessions are referred to as the Three Forms of Unity. As a result of this latter name, the addition of a new confessional statement, particularly if deemed undesirable, is frequently referred to in Dutch Reformed circles as a ‘fourth Form of Unity.’

Thus far I have described documents which intend to be confessional. There are, however, also documents and ecclesiastical moments that have a confessional character, although this is not their primary intention.

Elements in liturgical documents—rhymed versions of the psalms, hymns, and liturgical forms for special occasions—clearly have a confessional character. The songs of the church are indicative of its doctrine: in Dutch circles, the 1773 psalter and the 1802 hymnbook have both been challenged as being unsound in doctrine. Many liturgical forms—such as those for the use of the sacraments, profession of faith, excommunication, ordination, and marriage—have a doctrinal section. In fact, because the Three Forms of Unity barely touch the matter of marriage, the liturgical form for marriage functions in Dutch Reformed circles *de facto* as an exposition of the doctrine of marriage in the church.

The Church Order also bears a quasi-confessional character. It makes clear how the doctrine of the church (ecclesiology) is to function in practice. Within the Reformed community there is a tendency to give the church order a quasi-confessional character by adding a preamble stating the Scriptural principles with respect to the church (cf. 2.5.2.15).⁸¹¹

Liturgical documents and church orders are clearly ecclesiastical, for they are fixed by the church. There are also ecclesiastical moments that are not fixed in advance but which do have a confessional and ecclesiastical character. One may here think of sermons and publications by office-bearers, even the substance of pastoral visits.

present day strange ideas’ (Biesterveld and Kuyper, *Handboekje*, 319). Given the fact that also the Canons of Dort are referenced in these articles the phrase ‘old forms of unity’ refers to the Three Forms of Unity.

⁸⁰⁹ Besides publications dating to 1619 J. Vree has found publications dating to the following years: 1628 (Dutch), 1725 (Dutch), 1747 (Dutch), 1752 (Dutch), 1772 (Latin), 1780 (Dutch), 1780 (Dutch), and 1788 (Dutch). The editions dating to 1725 and 1780 are of the Three Forms of Unity together, the others are of the Canons on their own. (J. Vree, unpublished research).

⁸¹⁰ The Pacification Formula was also adopted by the Christian Reformed Churches in North America. For comparable material in the English speaking world see the Declaration of Principles adopted by the Protestant Reformed Churches in 1951.

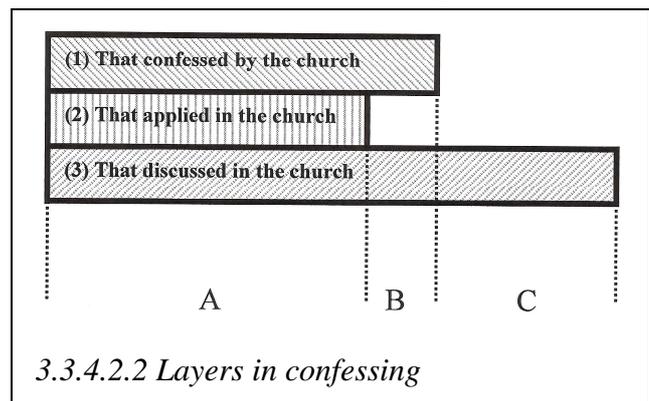
⁸¹¹ In North America the Canadian Reformed Churches and United Reformed Churches, both with Dortian polities, have drafted a church order that also contains a doctrinal preamble.

In short, confessing comes in various forms. There are documents with a clear confessional intent, there are ecclesiastically fixed documents that are indirectly confessional, and there are ecclesiastical moments that, though not fixed in advance, also have a confessional aspect to them. Documents with a clear confessional intent can be classified into various groups. In Dutch Reformed circles, the following distinctions have been made: symbols, confessions of faith, catechisms, canons, and doctrinal declarations. Of a less direct confessional character are liturgical documents and church orders. Moments and products of ecclesiastical activity also have confessional aspects to them.

3.3.4.2.2 *Layers in Confessing*

The confessing of the church takes places in all sorts of ways: both in writing and orally, in pastoral care and proclamation, by office bearers and non-office bearers. For the sake of abstractions and systematization, it is helpful to identify layers in the confessing of the church. These layers help identify cruces with respect to confessions and confessional subscription. Although I have not come across a systematization of this in the publications I have researched, I believe that many authors do have in mind some sort of scheme analogous to what I now present.

The first layer is that which is intentionally confessional. This layer tends to be fixed and usually comprises the documents that seek to be the pure expression of the faith convictions of the church community. Creeds and confessions of faith would clearly belong to this layer.



The second layer comprises all that officially applies the confessing of the church community to specific ends and in particular situations. The criterion here is that the application takes place officially, that is, under the direct supervision of the office bearers of the church. Clear examples of this second layer would be liturgical forms, the church order, sermons, and official church pronouncements.

The third layer comprises all that privately applies the confessing of the church community to specific ends and in particular situations. The third layer distinguishes itself from the second in that the application does not take place under the direct supervision of the office bearers of the church. Clear examples of this third layer would be private discussions and publications.

Because the second layer applies the first layer, the first layer may justifiably be considered to be the standard for the second layer. Moreover, confessing in the second layer can never move beyond the bounds of the first layer, since it is the church itself that speaks in this second layer. To put it more mathematically: the set of all that the church confesses should never be less than all that the church practices in application. One can imagine that there is a small set of confessed doctrines that are not applied in the church, this is designated 'B' in the adjoining diagram. For example, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in England and Wales (EPCEW) confesses the Westminster Confession which, among other things, speaks of the existence of synods and councils; yet the EPCEW has only one major assembly: a presbytery. However, it is more common in practice that layer (2) exceeds layer (1). For example, the GKN(v) teach in a liturgical form that marriage is the bond between one man and one woman, while this is not found in layer (1) materials.

In the third layer, those confessing will have to make clear to what extent their confessing is in line with the confessing of the church and to what extent it is not. For the GKN(v), discussions on the framework-hypothesis as opposed to what is known as six-day creation would fall into category C in the adjoining diagram.

In reflection on these layers, it may be observed that the first layer tends to be primarily in written form and official, while the third layer tends to be more in oral form and also non-official.

Applying this system to the practice of confessing in Dutch Reformed circles raises some tough, maybe even unanswerable questions. Before I turn to some of these, I wish to point out that the existence of such questions does not refute the legitimacy of the system just described. On the contrary, such questions help understand why the issue of confessional subscription is such an intricate one.

That creeds belong to the first layer of confessing will be admitted by all. That confessions belong to it also seems to make sense. The question may be raised, however, whether the confessions in all their parts fall under this layer. This matter will be further looked at in the following subsection (3.3.4.3).

One may also ask whether catechisms belong to the first or the second layer. Because catechisms are primarily intended for the instruction of the church people, I suggest that formally they belong to the second layer.

Interestingly the original Church Order of Dort only prescribed subscription to the Belgic Confession of Faith, while FS-1619 prescribed subscription to the Belgic Confession of Faith and the Heidelberg Catechism. Prior to the Synod of Dort, the practice existed to subscribe the Belgic Confession or (as opposed to 'and') the Heidelberg Catechism. This suggests that those living then felt there were no differences between the two as far as confessional material of subscriptional value was concerned.

Another question is whether canons belong to the first or second layer. The primary intention of such documents is to spell out the confessing of the church further. Hence their most logical classification would be the first layer.

FS-1619 prescribed subscription to the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism, as well as to the decisions of the National Synod held in 1618-19. The phrase 'as well as' may suggest that subscription to the Canons of Dort had a slightly different character than subscription to the other Forms of Unity. The Canons of Dort have also been described as an appendix to article 16 of the Belgic Confession (2.9.2.6) or as a sort of apocrypha (2.9.2.5). Moreover, it has been questioned whether they were intended to function in the churches in a way similar to the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism (2.14.2.1).

What is one to think of the position of other doctrinal declarations: for example the Walcheren Articles, the decisions of 1926 (2.10.2.2.4) and those of 1942 (2.10.2.2.7)? To the extent that such declarations increase the substance of the confessional material of the church (as in 1942), the material belongs to the first layer.⁸¹² However, to the extent that such declarations intend to reassert the confessional material of the church (as with the Walcheren Articles or in 1926), the material belongs to the second layer.

Finally, it is clear that in the third layer one could proceed beyond the bounds of confessing. The question is to what extent this may also take place in the second layer. A rhymed version of a psalm will choose a certain exegesis or may articulate a *theologoumenon*. A church order will have to make choices to be practicable, and in so doing it may give form to a *theologoumenon*. I point out that in such cases one does not encounter a going *beyond* the bounds of confessing in the first layer. Instead, there is a movement in the opposite direction: the room found in the first layer is not fully present in the second layer.

For example, I would hold that Scripture leaves it open whether ministers of the Word are to be ordained by a regional church (as practised by Presbyterians) or a local church (as practised by the Reformed). The first layer of confessing should then state no more than that ministers are to be ordained by the church. In the second layer (Church Order) something will have to be regulated. Westminster regulated that ordination takes place in the regional church, Dort regulated that ordination takes place in the local church.

⁸¹² The question whether it does so legitimately is not at issue now. Of course it is possible that doctrinal declarations which increase the confessional material of the church in fact unjustifiably elevate *theologoumena* to church doctrine.

Distinguishing three layers of confessing is thus helpful in considering the functioning of confessions and especially subscription to them. The third layer will be a mixture of ecclesiastical and personal confessing: it can obviously not be binding. The second layer is ecclesiastical but, for practical purposes, narrower than Scripture allows. It would be unwise to bind to such confessing exclusively as this would be an undue binding of the conscience.⁸¹³ It is the first layer that ought to set out the limits of the playing field, indicating clearly when a matter is out of bounds and when it is within bounds.

Given the practice in Dutch Reformed circles, it would seem to me that this ideal is not properly met. There are doctrinal elements in documents of the second layer (or even third) that, according to many church members, are confessional material, but are not found in documents of the first layer.⁸¹⁴ For the structures to work more efficiently, it would be advisable to reflect upon whether doctrines not found in the first layer should be introduced there. I will reflect on this further at later points in this chapter.

In short, one may identify three layers in confessing. The first layer is that material that is entirely ecclesiastical and primarily intended to be confessional. The second layer is that material and those moments that are entirely ecclesiastical and seek to apply the confessing of the church in concrete situations. The third layer is that material and those moments where matters are promulgated that are private but nevertheless stand in a church context. The distinction is useful in that it helps identify confessional materials that can function as standards (secondary to Scripture) in the church. There is a disparity between the theory outlined above and the practice in Dutch Reformed circles.

3.3.4.2.3 *The Passage from Act to Product*

The act of confessing leads to the product known as a confession. This confession is usually committed to paper. Various questions have been raised with respect to this process. Daubanton and Bavinck debated the motives for committing confessing to paper (2.10.2.1). Many have asserted that confessions must be born and cannot be planned (cf. 2.8.2.2, 2.10.2.2.4, 2.12.2.5, 2.14.2.4). Is this indeed so? Attempts have been made at having the church adopt new confessing, and all have failed. Why? Furthermore, is there indeed a vital difference between a confessing church and a confession church (cf. 2.10.2.3)? Finally, to what extent have the authors of confessional documents been aware of the hitches in the field of semantics (cf. 3.1.2.1)? These questions will receive attention in this subsection.

During the 1890s, Daubanton argued that the church committed its confessing to paper in order to perfect its confessions. His argument is not unlike that of the Remonstrants in the seventeenth century and Van Toorenenbergen in his debates with Kuyper on revision of the confessions (cf. 2.9.2.5-6). In opposition to Daubanton, Bavinck argued that the church committed its confessing to paper so that the church of the future might find continuity with the church up until then. This is much in line with the parting words of the foreign delegates at the Synod of Dort 1618-19 to maintain the confessed faith until Jesus should return.

⁸¹³ For example: one cannot, on the basis of the Church Order of Dort, argue that the Presbyterian system of church government is unreformed (i.e. contrary to the Reformed confessions). That there are substantive differences between the Continental Reformed and Presbyterian systems of church government is true. However, the argument that only one can be correct, is invalid. In my opinion, both systems fall within the boundaries of Scripture and thus ought to fall within the bounds of Reformed confessing.

⁸¹⁴ For example, the doctrine of marriage is touched on briefly in Lord's Day 41 but for the most is found in the liturgical form for marriage. An example of third layer confessing is the understanding of the relationship between the covenant and infant baptism in the GKN(v). From the perspective of confessing the GKN(v) have never rejected the doctrine of presumptive regeneration. (As indicated by J. Faber in Van Dam, *Liberation*, 21-23.)

It is my impression that the two sides in such debates tend to be more concerned with extrapolations of the opponents' position than their true position. On the one hand, there is the fear that confessions petrify and become items for a museum. On the other hand, there is the concern that nothing is fixed and all is uncertain. It is to be admitted that the course of history provides examples to justify such concerns. Traditionalists had a tendency to elevate the confessions beyond criticism, while the introduction of AR-1816 clearly aimed to loosen the bond with the confessing of the church in the past. In fact, the debate around the phrase 'maintenance of their doctrine' focuses on precisely this point. However, viewed in the light of the phenomenon of 'confessing', it is doubtful whether such debates are justified. I have previously concluded that faith, doctrine and confessing are not to be *maintained* but to be *constantly conformed*. This gives credence to the argument that the church's confessing (and thus its confessions) is open to revision. On the other hand, the source for the church's confessing is fixed, implying that the church's confessing is not easily revised. In its confessing, the church of any moment hears the faith and doctrine of the catholic church. A point perhaps overlooked in debates is that a written confession should not in the first instance be considered the confessing of the church of a particular moment but as the confessing of the church *since* that moment. Moreover, changes to the confessing of the church in the course of time must always be of such a character that the church prior to the changes would have agreed to this substance if it had been aware of this substance. When articulating its confessing and committing it to paper, the church enables itself to be catholic in time. It expresses unity of faith with the church in the past and allows the church in the future further to develop its faith.

In discussions on the formation of confessional documents, one frequently encounters the argument that confessions must be born. This position was defended by, among others, Heldring (2.8.2.2), Dankbaar (2.12.2.5) and Graafland (2.14.2.4). GS Assen 1927 of the GKN was told the same (2.10.2.2.5). However, not all documents that function as confessions have in fact been born in the heat of the battle. This might be true for the Belgic Confession (though the ecclesiastical edition is much shorter than the original thrown over the castle-wall in Doornik). The Heidelberg Catechism, however, is the product of theological consideration and the Canons of Dort are the well-considered product of a synod. Looking further afield, the emergence of the Westminster Standards cannot really be described as a "birth" either. Finally, while aspects of the ecumenical creeds can be traced back to battles, it took many years for these confessions to take the shape they presently have. The argument, therefore, that confessions *must* be born, that they can *only* come to be in some moment of bright inspiration is, in my opinion, invalid. While the heat of the battle indeed increases the urge to confess and is often the catalyst for a new confession, the peace thereafter is as necessary to refine confessing to that which is necessary and edifying.

Reference is often made here to the fact that the church is to be in statu confessionis. Those using the term mean by this that the church is called upon concretely to voice its convictions.⁸¹⁵ In view of historical data, being in statu confessionis does not imply that confessions are born.

If it is true that confessions need not be born, one may well ask why attempts at new confessing in the twentieth century failed. The answer is not to be found, I believe, in the structures or the moment chosen to confess but in the substance of what was being confessed. A confessional document is to articulate the confessing of the church. However, attempts at confessing during the twentieth century contained elements that did not reflect the confessing of the church but the confessing of a sizeable portion of the church to the exclusion of another section. Because the substance of confessing met with opposition—one might say, because the substance to be confessed was never appropriated by the whole church—it was never able to function as

⁸¹⁵ See Wielenga, *Akker*, 31-72.

confessional material in the church. The Doctrinal Declarations of 1942 and 1946 have probably come closest.

I turn next to the matter of the confessing church versus the confession church. Haitjema articulated this matter early in the twentieth century as follows. The confession church is the church that survives on the loyalty of its members to its documents. This prevented the church from being outward focussed, a church standardized by God's Word seeking to bring that Word into the world. The latter is the confessing church. (Cf. 2.10.2.3.)

I consider the dilemma false. In order for the church to be a confessing church it needs confessional documents. I admit that having confessional documents may lead to formalism and externalization. However, this is not a necessary consequence of having confessional documents. In fact, the conscious act of articulating its confessing and committing it to paper, or the appropriation of confessing, is proof that the church is a confessing church. One need only point to the SoW-process or the GKN(v) to demonstrate that, structurally, having confessional documents does not prevent the church from being a confessing church as Haitjema defined it.

Finally, attention needs to be given to findings in the field of semantics. Fixing a confession in a particular context does not necessarily mean that it will function similarly in other contexts. The passage of time brings with it other contexts. Hence it would be naive to assume that formulations once adopted can always serve their end adequately. Just as new translations of Scripture are required, aged confessions will require at least renewed translation.

In short, the church commits its confessing to paper in order to be catholic in time. Confessional documents need not be born in the heat of the battle; subsequent moments of reflection and consideration are just as vital to adequately functioning confessions. Existing attempts at new confessing have failed because there was disagreement about the substance confessed. These failures do not prove that, from a structural point of view, the church cannot write new confessions. There is no dilemma between the confessing church and the confession church; in fact, committing confessing to paper and remaining with this confessing is part of the act of confessing.

3.3.4.2.4 Summary

The set of confessional documents and moments of confessing is much larger than those documents referred to as confessions and those moments considered to be the confessing of the church. With respect to such documents and moments, it is helpful to distinguish three main layers, in which the first layer is normative for the second and third. Finally, by committing its confessing to writing, the church expresses its catholicity in time, and fulfils its divinely given mandate to confess.

3.3.4.3 VARIOUS ASPECTS TO A CONFESSION

Reflection on confessional writings particularly on the point of their status and use will often distinguish between various components of confessional writings. Such distinctions play an important role in determining and describing the limits of their binding authority. From various publications, I have distilled a number of aspects or components that I wish to outline (3.3.4.3.1) and evaluate (3.3.4.3.2).

3.3.4.3.1 Outline of Various Aspects to a Confession

The most common distinction encountered is that between *form and substance*. The 'form' is the way in which a confession is brought, its 'how'; the 'substance' is that which a confession says, its 'what'. A large portion of discussions on confessional subscription revolves around the border between 'form' and 'substance', and how these two components can be accurately delineated (e.g. 2.12.2.4). Because the substance of a confession is essentially abstract (formless),

some have argued that the true substance of a confession is not what is being said but what the confessors intended to say (cf. 2.7.2.6; cf. also 3.1.2.1.1 on the locutionary and illocutionary act).

Staying for a moment with the concept of ‘substance’, one can distinguish between **main or primary** issues and **side or secondary** issues.⁸¹⁶ As broad statements of faith written in the heat of battle, many confessional writings may state more than might have been necessary. Confessional materials may also be extraneous because of a verbose linguistic style.⁸¹⁷ A confessional writing may overemphasize a particular doctrine and hardly touch on another.⁸¹⁸ A confessional writing may also expound doctrines that are directly related to one’s salvation and doctrines that are less directly related to one’s salvation.⁸¹⁹ With respect to the latter distinction, reflection on confessional subscription speaks of the fundamental and non-fundamental articles.⁸²⁰ Even within an article of faith, such a distinction can be applied.⁸²¹ It is frequently argued that substance of a secondary character is not relevant to the question of confessional fidelity. Problems arise on this score when some consider a particular phrase secondary where others consider it primary.

The components of the substance of a confessional document may also be classified in a different way. There are **thesis statements**, statements that express a faith conviction. There are also **antithetical statements**, statements that reject a faith conviction as being a heresy.

Concerning the form of a confessional writing, a number of distinctions are made that require attention. A first component is **argumentation**. Larger confessions tend not only to contain mere statements of faith but also attempt to underpin such statements with argument. A first sub-component is thus the **logic** in a confession. It is frequently alleged that the logical connection between two statements in a confession is not necessarily of confessional value. One can at the same time maintain premise and conclusion and yet reject the logical connection.⁸²²

A second sub-component of argumentation is the **Scripture proof**. In this case, the premises for an argument are in fact texts from Scripture. These texts may be quoted in full in the running text of the confession, may be specifically referenced in the running text of the confession, or may simply be referenced via a marginal note. The third form is usually of a later date and is generally not considered part of the confession itself. The other two types are considered part of the confession but are generally considered of the same value as ‘argumentation’ in general. One may deny the fact that a particular text proves a doctrine as long as one maintains the text as Scriptural and the doctrine as one’s conviction.⁸²³

⁸¹⁶ In Dutch: *hoofdzaken* and *bijzaken*.

⁸¹⁷ Wierenga, "Teken en Boodschap", 34.

⁸¹⁸ For example, the Heidelberg Catechism hardly deals explicitly with the doctrine of revelation and devotes six Lord’s Days to the matter of the sacraments.

⁸¹⁹ For example, the Belgic Confession of Faith has an article on ‘Justification by Faith’ and an article on ‘The Civil Government.’

⁸²⁰ Or ‘more fundamental’ and ‘less fundamental’ or ‘central’ and ‘peripheral’. For a discussion of this distinction and how it functions in the Dutch context see Diermanse, *Fundamenteel*.

⁸²¹ For example, in BC art. 4 one finds a list of the canonical books that are confessed to comprise Holy Scripture. In this list one also finds the names of many of the supposed authors of these books. In the original edition of the Belgic Confession of Faith Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs were attributed to Solomon and the Epistle to the Hebrews to Paul. It is argued that one need not necessarily accept Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes or Song of Songs or Pauline authorship of Hebrews to be faithful to the confession. For the point is that one considers Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and Hebrews canonical.

⁸²² For example, BC art. 5 confesses that the Holy Scriptures are received as ‘holy and canonical’ by the church ‘not so much’ because the church receives and approves them as such, ‘but especially because’ the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God ‘and also because’ they contain the evidence thereof in themselves; ‘for’, even the blind are able to perceive that the things foretold in them are being fulfilled. It has been disputed whether the fulfilment of Scripture can serve to prove the holy character and canonicity of Scripture.

⁸²³ For example, BC art. 9 adduces the plural first person pronoun in Gen. 1:26 and 27 and 3:22 as proof for a multiplicity in God. However, it is not considered a breach of confessional fidelity to exegete these texts differently

Another form of argumentation that requires specific attention is the matter of **illustration**. An illustration serves to clarify the presentation of a particular matter. Sometimes it is also considered to have logical force, and then fills the role of a premise. Disputing such an illustration is generally considered legitimate as long as the confessed matter is not disputed.⁸²⁴

Besides argumentation as a sub-component of the form a confessional writing, I also note the **phrasing** of a particular doctrine. A confession contains articulated statements concerning abstract convictions.⁸²⁵

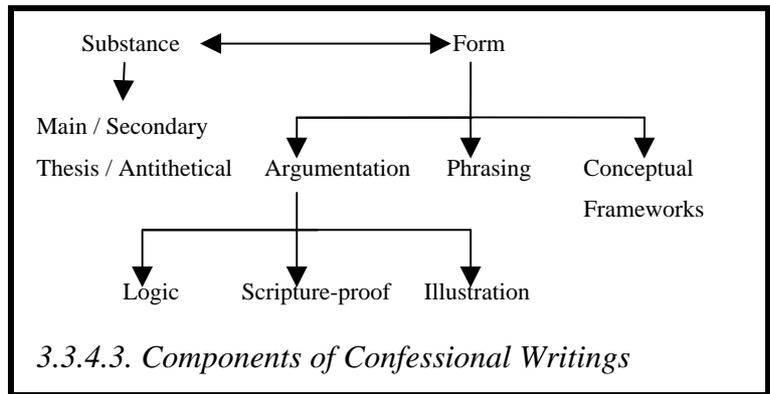
This has raised the question whether one is bound to the precise wording of a confession. On the one hand, it is noted that words, even a single letter, can make a world of difference to what is being confessed.⁸²⁶

On the other hand, many scholars have noted that meanings and usage of words change or become obsolete, making it dubious what is being said.⁸²⁷ This component receives much attention in debates trying to distinguish between a ‘literal’ and ‘less than literal but nevertheless complete’ binding to a confessional writing. It also surfaces when confessions undergo linguistic revision.⁸²⁸

Brümmer has distinguished between constative statements, expressive statements, commissive statements, and prescriptive statements. As confessing, the whole of a confession is a commissive statement: the promise to hold this faith. Confessions further contain expressive statements (I believe...) and prescriptive statements (I ought to...). These forms make clear that confessions contain both ‘doctrinal’ and ‘ethical’ substance. (Cf. 3.1.2.1.)

The last sub-component of form I wish to consider is that of **conceptual frameworks**. Because confessions are products of their own time, they will reflect the philosophical paradigm or worldview from which they were written. Critiques of confessions often discuss whether a particular confessional statement has been produced by a particular conceptual framework rather than by Scripture⁸²⁹ and question in what way one is bound to this confessional component.

In summary, reflection on confessions and confessional subscription frequently distinguish various components of a confessional writing. In general these components can be classified as ‘form’ and ‘substance’, each of these being further subdivided into components as shown in the



so that they cannot serve as proof for the Trinity. There are no problems provided one does not deny the fact that Scripture teaches that God is Three in One and that Gen. 1:26-27 and 3:22 belong to Holy Scripture.

⁸²⁴ In Dutch discussions reference is frequently made to BC art. 35. Here Judas Iscariot and the Samaritan Magician Simon are referred to as examples of persons who were admitted to the Lord’s Supper but did not receive the grace Christ. Publications on confessional binding frequently remark that a confessor is bound to the confession of unbelievers not receiving the grace Christ when they partake in the Lord’s Supper, but that he is not bound to believe that Judas Iscariot or Simon the Magician ever partook of the Lord’s Supper.

⁸²⁵ As to whether language can adequately articulate these convictions (I prefer this term to ‘experiences’), see McGrath, *Genesis of Doctrine*, 66-72.

⁸²⁶ A clear example of this is the discussion on ὁμοουσίον. See Schilder, *HC*, 2:113-114.

⁸²⁷ For example, is the phrase ‘sign and seal’ as used in HC q&a 66 a doublet or does the Heidelberg Catechism here distinguish between two aspects of a sacrament? See Wierenga, "Binomen" and Gootjes, "Tekenen Zegel".

⁸²⁸ See Wierenga, "Tekenen Boodschap".

⁸²⁹ For example, BC art. 1 confesses God to be “a single simple spiritual Being”. Wiskerke believes this kind of definition to have its origin in Greek philosophy. He concludes (p. 61): “Apostate philosophy should be pointed out as one of the primary guilty parties when it comes to inaccurate confessional terminology.” (Wiskerke, "Confessie", 58-61.)

adjoining diagram. Much of reflection on confessional subscription is concerned with discerning the limits between the various components, and how they relate to confessional fidelity.⁸³⁰

3.3.4.3.2 Evaluation

The foregoing is a phenomenological analysis. The question to be answered is whether such distinctions are functional and helpful in the matter of confessions. While much is done with the foregoing distinctions, it is my impression that this has in fact never been thoroughly thought through. I believe some critical remarks are in order.

Firstly, I doubt whether ‘form’ and ‘substance’ can be as sharply delineated as is often suggested in debates. ‘Form’ itself can have a ‘substantial’ side to it. For example, is the order of HC q&a 2 analytical (and thus purely formal) or also chronological (and thus ‘substantial’)? There is difference of opinion on this matter. Moreover, semantic studies have indicated that words not only express a concept, they may also determine and define a concept (cf. 3.1.2.1).

One may think here of the struggles at Chalcedon to articulate the natures of Christ. Since a positive formulation proved impossible—the union of Christ’s two natures is beyond human comprehension—a negative formulation was chosen. Denial of error is often easier than a positive statement of the truth.

Further, whilst there is no binding to proof texts, yet a Scriptural foundation for a confessed doctrine is a *sine qua non*. Disagreeing with the use of a proof text in the confessions is permissible, but what if there is disagreement on the use of *all* the proof texts for a particular doctrine?

One may even go a step further and debate whether the procedure of ‘proof-texts’ does injustice to Scripture, as if Holy Scripture consists of a compendium of hidden ‘truths’ that are to be connected like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

Likewise, the aspect ‘argumentation’ tends to be classified as ‘formal’. However, a line of argument can have a substantive character. One may think, for example, of the many questions in the Heidelberg Catechism that begin with the interrogative ‘why?’.

The same can be said for philosophical influences. The distinction ‘body and soul’ in the Heidelberg Catechism has been traced back to Greek influences, although it also clear that there are biblical reasons for using such terms. Discussions on the correctness of this distinction are not merely formal. One cannot, for example, deny the existence of the soul separate from the body and yet confess with Lord’s Day 22 that upon one’s death the soul goes to be with Christ while the body remains on planet earth.

The foregoing illustrates that identifying something in a confessional document as ‘form’ or ‘substance’ is not the end of the matter. The question to be asked is not whether something is ‘form’ or ‘substance’. The question to be asked is whether from a confessional point of view there is a substantial side to the matter being debated.

However, determining whether something has a substantial side to it is not the end of the matter. For a distinction has also been made between primary and secondary substance. Distinctions in weight are legitimate (cf. e.g. Matt. 23:23) and do function in practice. However, there does not seem to be clarity on what distinguishes primary from secondary substance. Most common is the distinction between ‘fundamental’ and ‘non-fundamental’ doctrines.⁸³¹ In general, it is then thought that the set of non-fundamental articles is identical to the set of *theologoumena*. However, such distinctions seem to create more questions than they answer. From an empirical perspective, Diermanse’s conclusion is correct: there is no such thing as “*the fundamental articles*” (2.12.2.8). The debates during 1960s in the GKN(v) leading to the formation of the NGK also make clear how difficult this matter can be. It would serve the functioning of confessional documents if there was

⁸³⁰ The Christian Reformed Church in North America adopted in 1976 a declaration concerning confessional subscription. In this declaration reference is made to “references, allusions and remarks that are incidental to the formulation of these doctrines.” See Godfrey, “Dutch Subscription”, 72-73.

⁸³¹ As at GS The Hague 1914 of the GKN; see 2.10.2.2.3.

more reflection on this point with regard to individual doctrines. On this score, present confessional documents, including the ecumenical creeds, are fallible as guides.⁸³²

Given the foregoing, one could develop a more complex tiered system of confessional substance. This would mean that, besides the three layers in the confessing of the church, there are also tiers within the three layers (especially the first). Various concepts have been used here. The concepts of ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ have been used in reflection on confessions and subscription to them (cf. 2.12.2.5, 2.12.2.8, and 2.13.1.2). The concepts of ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ are, I believe, more suited than ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ since the former makes clear there is a scale while the second suggests there is a clear line of demarcation. Thus too, one should not speak of ‘fundamental’ and ‘non-fundamental’ but of ‘more fundamental’ and ‘less fundamental’ articles of faith. Such a classification creates a scale or spectrum rather than categories; one could also here speak of ‘relief’ in the confessional material.

Classification of this sort demands criteria to determine where a particular confessed doctrine is to be positioned on the scale. At this stage, it is too early to make such a suggestion. I will return to this in the concluding paragraphs of 3.3.7 and 3.3.8.

The foregoing is not intended to be the final word on the matter. It is primarily intended to prove that present positions—often considered beyond criticism—require reflection and adjustment.

3.3.4.3.3 Summary

In short, various components can be identified within a confessional document. However, the classification of components in debates on confessions and confessional elements is not as functional and useful as is often thought. The distinction between ‘form’ and ‘substance’ is not as clear-cut as is frequently thought. Components that seem ‘formal’ may have a substantial side to them. Moreover, substantial components can be scaled in importance by looking at how they are presented in Scripture, and to what extent they are relevant in the present age and circumstances.

This has consequences for confessional subscription. Positions such as ‘one is only bound to the fundamental articles in the confessions’ or ‘one is only bound to the substance and not the form of the confessions’ differentiate the matter insufficiently. With each component, its substantive element and the weight thereof need to be determined. In many cases, this will only become clear during the discussion thereof.

3.3.4.4 SUMMARY

The passage from confessing to confession, from the act to the written document, knows many pitfalls and points of discussion. Some have emphasized the fact that confessing repeats Scripture, others that it responds to Scripture. The dilemma is false, for confessing is a response to Scripture that seeks to repeat Scripture. There has also been debate on how the substance of confessing may be seen substantially: is it a list of necessary doctrines or a summary of divine revelation? I have concluded that both are in error, for they suggest that the confessor has a total overview of the source of confessing. It would be more appropriate to speak of the ‘main substance’ of confessing.

The church commits its confessing to writing. However, the confessing of the church is not only found in its confessional documents, it is also found in documents of other types and in its actions. Hence it is helpful to distinguish three layers within the confessing of the church. The first is the confessing of the church *per se*, the second is the confessing of the church put to various uses, and the third is the confessing of the church as found intermingled with personal opinions in the

⁸³² Sometimes it is argued that the ecumenical creeds contain the primary substance and all that is extra in the Three Forms of Unity is secondary. This explains the disparity between the questions asked at profession of faith in the GKN(v) and the Canadian Reformed Churches (the former referencing the Apostles’ Creed, the latter speaking of the Reformed Religion). However, limiting the primary substance to the ecumenical creeds removes (among other things) the doctrines of election and justification by faith alone from the primary confessing of the church, which certainly does not suit a church with a Calvinist identity.

products of its office bearers. The first layer is normative for the other two. The propriety of committing confessing to writing has been questioned. I have concluded that it is proper, since the church thus expresses its catholicity in time and fulfils a divinely given mandate to confess.

Various aspects have been distinguished in regard to confessions. The classification of components given is, however, not as functional and useful as often thought. In particular, the distinction between 'form' and 'substance' fails, since many 'formal' components have a substantial side to them. Furthermore, substantial components of a confession can be scaled in importance by looking at their relationship to Scripture and their relevance in the present age and circumstances. This has important consequences for the matter of substantial subscription. The commonly held position 'one is only bound to the substance of the confession' especially requires further differentiation.

3.3.5 THE FUNCTIONS OF A CONFSSIONAL DOCUMENT

Thus far, I have paid attention to the nature of confessing: its object, its subject, and the passage from confessing to confession. I am thus now in a position to explore the phenomenon of confession (or rather, the confessional document) in order to come to grips with this phenomenon and the services it may render in the church.

In this section I wish to study the functions confessional documents fulfil. First I will look at the confessions in practice, presenting an empirical overview of the functions (3.3.5.1). Concluding that confessional documents do not always fully suit the functions into which they are pressed, I will scrutinize more systematically the need to fix the church's confessing in confessional documents (3.3.5.2).

3.3.5.1 EMPIRICAL OVERVIEW

The issue of the functions of confessions can be answered descriptively and prescriptively. In this subsection, I do so descriptively. First I will give an overview of images that are used to describe confessions (3.3.5.1.1). One might also describe this as an overview of characterizations of confessions with respect to their form (cf. 3.3.4.1). Next I will analyse the various functions that confessions fulfil (3.3.5.1.2). Finally, I will look at how confessional documents fulfil various functions at the same time (3.3.5.1.3).

3.3.5.1.1 Images Used to Describe Confessions

It is in the context of characterizing confessions according to usage that one encounters all sorts of metaphors. The focus here is also more on confessing as it occurs in its fixed form: confessional writings. However, the characterizations apply as much to confessing in the abstract sense as the product. Hence it makes sense to review these characterizations at this point. I will first briefly review them and then will attempt to group them.

Confessional writings have been described as **milestones**, writings that mark an apex of doctrinal development in the church.⁸³³ Confessional writings are also described as **road signs** or **buoys**: just as road signs point out the direction one should go, and buoys mark the boundaries of navigable waters, so confessions indicate where one should focus one's faith and the limits wherein one is safe.⁸³⁴ A typically Dutch metaphor is that the confessions are **dikes** that protect the church from dangers of heresy just as real dikes protect the Dutch countryside from floods.⁸³⁵ Also rather Dutch is the metaphor that confessions are **boardwalks**, the *terra firma* from where one can

⁸³³ See Groen van Prinsterer, *Het Regt*, 50-51; Valetton as quoted by Van der Sluis, *Ethische Richting*, 71.

⁸³⁴ See Van Toorenenbergen, *Onderteekening*, 8-9 (and Volten, *Belijden*, 137); Van der Dussen, "Functioneren", 202-203.

⁸³⁵ See Wormser, *Onkerkelijke Rigting*, 25. This imagery was also used by Classis Walcheren (with thanks to J. W. Veltkamp).

survey the treacherous marshland of heterodoxy all about.⁸³⁶ Confessions are frequently described as **testimonies** as they explain to those of a different confessional persuasion or a third party what are the standpoints of a particular community of faith.⁸³⁷ Common also is the characterization of a confession as a **motto** or **flag**: confessional writings are considered rallying points for like-minded believers who are thereby distinguished from other groups of believers.⁸³⁸ Some understand confessional writings to form the **constitution** of the church, the foundation on which the church as structure is built.⁸³⁹ Confessions have been called the **score** for the orchestral performance of the church.⁸⁴⁰ A confession is a **song**, bringing to expression the joys of the heart to the glory of God.⁸⁴¹ Finally, confessions are described as **rules** or **standards**, whether of faith or of preaching.⁸⁴²

Each of these characterizations brings to light a different usage of a confession. The first two emphasize what one might term internal uses. As milestones, confessions point the church to its past, reminding it of what apexes it has known. As buoys and road-signs, confessions point the church to the future, indicating the paths along which it should walk. The following three characterizations describe an element of the church in its relation to the world about it. As dikes, confessions protect the church from teachings that do not match its identity. As boardwalks, confessions allow the church to conquer territories from a firm standpoint. As testimonies, confessions identify the church for outsiders. The next two characterizations focus on the unifying force of confessions. The concept of rallying point looks at the voluntary aspect of unity among believers, the concept of constitution looks at the judicial aspect of this unity, the concept of score tries to express both the variation and harmony in this unity. The final two characterizations stand by themselves. As songs, confessions are focused on God. As rules or standards, confessions aim to regulate.

Because the metaphors have been drawn from a wide range of literature spanning two centuries, there is a measure of overlap. At times these characterizations are played out against each other. Usually, however, these images serve merely to illustrate what an author understands the role of a confession to be. In general, the use of metaphors gives a one-sided picture of confessional doctrines. All of them have a truth to them, albeit some more than others.

3.3.5.1.2 *The Functions Distinguished*

In the foregoing subsection I have already referred to the usage of confessions. In this subsection I wish to systematize the various functions that confessional writings are considered to have or clearly to fulfil in a church. Such lists of 'functions' are not very common, and those that do exist are not always comprehensive (whether intentionally so I cannot tell).⁸⁴³ When such lists are given, they are usually given *a posteriori*, referring to the 'functions' of confessions. Some,

⁸³⁶ See Schilder, "Symbolvorming", 338-339.—Being a land mainly reclaimed from water (either lakes or sea) the Dutch countryside is criss-crossed by ditches. Planks called *vlonders*—here translated as boardwalks—are laid across these ditches.

⁸³⁷ See Van Sliedrecht, *Tucht*, 6.

⁸³⁸ See Mul, "Aard"; Polman, *NGB*, 1:16-30. I would include here the idea that confessional writings serve to distinguish Christian churches from each other (e.g. Heringa, *Zeven Stellingen*, 51).

⁸³⁹ See Moorrees, *Adres GG*, 7.

⁸⁴⁰ "Rapport 1971", 14.

⁸⁴¹ Deddens, "Pijler en Fundament", 218.

⁸⁴² The discussion on confessions as 'rules of faith' and 'rules for preaching' is a rather complicated and confusing one. I will address it at a later point. See Van Hogendorp, *Hervormde Gemeente*, 89-90; Van Ruler, *Hoe functionneert?*, 18-20; Van Sliedrecht, *Tucht*, 13.

⁸⁴³ An exception being the list contained in Deputaten Kerkelijke Eenheid, *Rapport*.

however, will present the list in a more abstract *a priori* fashion, referring to ‘reasons’ for confessions.⁸⁴⁴ When all is said and done, both approaches come down to the same thing.

Study of the functions of confessional documents indicates that the functions can be grouped into three categories: doxological, declaratory, and defining.⁸⁴⁵

First of all, confessions fulfil a **doxological** function. The Hebrew term *הלל* means both ‘to praise’ and ‘to confess’, indicating that confessing is a form of praising. Of importance also is Heb. 13:15, where ‘a sacrifice of praise’ is described as ‘the fruit of the lips that confess Christ’s Name.’ As an expression of what a person or church believes concerning God, His being and His acts, a confession can indeed be characterized as praise. The fact that the earliest creeds were used around the liturgical act of baptism⁸⁴⁶ would also emphasize the doxological function of a confession. Thus Dutch Reformed liturgy also has a specific place for confession of faith, which in more recent years has been given form by having the congregation sing an unrhymed version of the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed. The doxological function of a confession is considered by some to be its primary function.⁸⁴⁷

A second function that confessions fulfil may be described as **declaratory**. Confessions ‘speak’, they have a substance that is declared. As declarations, confessions can serve in a variety of ways. The more important sub-functions of a confession as declaration are its kerygmatic function, its didactic function, and what I will term its ‘*paracletic*’ function.

By **kerygmatic** function, I understand the use of confessions in preaching. Confessions can be seen as brief sermons on Scripture that convey a message to the outside world. With a view to the kerygmatic function of confessions Dutch reformed churches have developed the practice of preaching from the Heidelberg Catechism.⁸⁴⁸

Confessions also have a **didactic** function. Those who are to become members in full standing of the church must be acquainted with the faith or set of beliefs they will be held responsible for. To that end, the church uses its confessions as instructional aids. Kelly claims that early declaratory creeds served this purpose.⁸⁴⁹ In more modern times, catechisms are generally drawn up for that purpose.

For the third sub-function, I have coined the term ‘*paracletic*’.⁸⁵⁰ As a communion of believers, Christians comfort, encourage, and admonish one another so that they may continue to walk in the ways of the Lord. To this end, confessions have frequently proven useful. For confessions are often more abstracted formulations of Scriptural truths and thus lend themselves more easily for use in a given situation than concrete texts from Scripture. Hence, a Dutch Reformed pastor is just as likely to read Lord’s Day 1 at a death-bed and Lord’s Day 22 during a condolence visit as he

⁸⁴⁴ Thus Trimp, "Zin en Funktie" takes an *a posteriori* approach while Polman, *NGB*, 1:52-62 takes an *a priori* approach. I have chosen for the *a posteriori* approach since I am concerned at this stage with describing existing phenomena.

⁸⁴⁵ Müller writes “Christian confessions serve the purposes of acknowledgement, praise and delimitation” (*Enc. chr.*, s.v. “creeds and confessions”, 636).

⁸⁴⁶ Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 30-39.

⁸⁴⁷ De Graaf, *Ware Geloof*, 8; Kamphuis, "Geloofszekerheid en Binding", 136-140. Volten considers this function to be the one with which a confession stands or falls (Volten, *Belijden*, 189). Though Trimp lists ‘doxological’ as the first function, he does not mark it as primary (Trimp, "Zin en Funktie"). Van Genderen does not make separate mention of this function (Van Genderen, *Betekenis*).

⁸⁴⁸ On this practice see Gootjes, "Catechism Preaching".

⁸⁴⁹ Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 39-61.

⁸⁵⁰ *Paracletic* is derived from the Greek verb παρακαλέω meaning “to comfort, encourage and admonish”, the associated noun παράκλησις was used in synagogues to refer to the sermon. The term is difficult to translate as it carries all three nuances at the same time and there is no English or Dutch term which does the same (see, for example, the NKJV translation of 1 Thess. 5:11 and 14). Since the term Paraclete as title for the Holy Spirit is known to both the English and Dutch languages, I have felt at liberty to coin the adjective *paracletic*. In the Dutch field of poimenics (pastoral theology) the noun *paraclesis* has also been introduced.

may read a portion of Scripture. Similarly, CoD 1:17 plays an important role in pastoral care for the parents of children deceased in infancy.

The third function that confessions fulfil can be described as **defining**. Confessions determine the constituency of a group as well as what is deemed acceptable or unacceptable. I distinguish three sub-functions: the uniting function, the apologetic function, and the anti-heretical function.

Many confessions are written with the intention of binding together believers of the same faith. This may be designated the **uniting** function of a confession. The title page of the Belgic Confession unequivocally proclaimed that it contained the faith adopted ‘with common accord’.⁸⁵¹ Confessions are not only uniting in that they form the common expression of faith of a group of believers, they are also intended as an invitation to all those who share this faith. With respect to its unifying function, confessions are a positive exposition of what is believed.

Some confessions were written in order to defend the right of existence of the group holding the particular confession. This I designate the **apologetic** function of a confession. Many of the early Reformation Confessions, in particular the Augsburg and Belgic Confessions, were written in order to testify of the faith believed on in the churches and to dispel slander. Such confessions were often discussion papers for religious discourses originally, often initiated by civil authorities.⁸⁵²

Some confessions were written in order to distinguish between what is and what is not acceptable within the confines of the church holding the confession. Such confessions specifically distinguish true doctrine from false doctrine (heresy). Hence I designate this the **anti-heretical** function of a confessional document. For example, the Canons of Dort were drawn up in order to make clear with respect to certain points of doctrine what was and what was not acceptable.⁸⁵³

In conclusion, the functions of a confession may be schematically presented as follows:

Doxological	Declaratory	Defining
	- Kerygmatic	- Uniting
	- Didactic	- Apologetic
	- Paracletic	- Anti-heretical

3.3.5.1.3 *The Functions in Practice*

Frequently, studies on confessions focus on just one or a few of its functions. Conversely, an exposition of the functions of a confession may isolate one confession per function. The latter implies in its most extreme form that a particular confession is limited to just one particular use.

However, phenomenological research reveals that confessional writings are all to some degree pressed to serve in each function. In the course of time, catechetical instruction in Reformed circles has grown to encompass the Three Forms of Unity (and thus, by default, also the Ecumenical Creeds). The appropriateness of this has been disputed (cf. 2.14.2.1.5-6). However, there seems to be a limit to this. For GKN(v) synods have determined that guidelines for preaching should be the Heidelberg Catechism and not the Belgic Confession of Faith or the Canons of Dort, though materials from these two confessions may also be used.⁸⁵⁴

Historically speaking, there is also no consistency when it comes to subscription. For example, the Church Order of Dort refers only to the subscription of the Belgic Confession, while FS-1619 prescribes subscription to all Three Forms of Unity. Whether this has always worked properly is debatable.

⁸⁵¹ For a facsimile of the first French publication see Bakhuizen van den Brink, *De Nederlandse Belijdenisgeschriften*, viii.

⁸⁵² See Stolk, *Godsdienstgesprekken*, 52-90.

⁸⁵³ At the background to this defining function lies McGrath’s understanding of doctrine as ‘social demarcation’ (McGrath, *Genesis of Doctrine*, 37-52).

⁸⁵⁴ *Acta...GKN(v)...* 1996:art. 44.

It seems justified to argue that all confessional documents can fulfil all functions. Since every confession is an expression and exposition of divine action and interaction with humanity, each confession bears the character of doxology.⁸⁵⁵ Moreover, every confession is an official declaration of the church. Finally, since confessional writings are official ecclesiastical statements, they will always serve to state the common faith, and can be employed to define that faith and the group adhering to it. Distinguishing the various functions does not yet imply separating them.

In practice not all confessions can serve in all functions, though, theoretically speaking, one might expect all confessions to do so. The solution to this paradox is that 'functionality' is to a large degree determined not by the *substance* of confessing but the *form* in which it is presented. That the tendency exists in practice to press unsuited confessional documents into certain functions is because the confession that is suited to the function does not have the substance required.

For example, the Heidelberg Catechisms lacks a question and answer on the doctrine of election, so that the tendency exists to have catechism students rote learn a line from CoD 1:7. It would make more sense to augment the Heidelberg Catechism as a teaching aid with such a question and answer.

In view of the functions of confessional documents in the church, it might in fact be appropriate to pour the confessional substance into moulds that suit doxological, declarative and defining ends (cf. 3.3.10). Remoulding the body of confessional material owned by the church would not necessarily mean setting aside the confessions already held, as, for example, the Westminster Confession replaced the Scots Confession. It would mean accepting the existing confessions as documents with historical and substantial value for the churches, in the way the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism subsumed the ecumenical creeds.

During the SoW-process, the group Kernen van Belijden poured the substance of the confessional heritage with respect to five topics into three different moulds. However, nothing has ever come of this project (cf. 2.13.1.2.3).

Thus, while one can identify various functions for confessions and prove from their usage that some confessions lend themselves more for some functions than others, confessions can always, because of their substance, serve to some degree in all functions. Highlighting a particular function with respect to a confessional document can never be at the expense of its total character.

3.3.5.1.4 Summary and Conclusion

Confessions have been described with all sorts of images. The danger with images is that they become determinative. On the one hand, the image is considered to be an all-encompassing description of the confession, so that functions that fall outside the image are rejected. On the other hand, a particular confession is felt not to meet the standard of the image, and thus is denied to be a proper confession. Images clarify and illustrate, they do no more.

It is more appropriate to understand the workings of confessions by looking at the functions they fulfil in the church. Three main categories can be distinguished: doxological, didactic, and defining. There is an interplay between these functions. However, experience shows that not all confessional documents are equally suited to serve in all functions. It would be advisable to pour the same confessional substance into different moulds for different ends. Those seeking the limits of permissible teachings require a different document from those who instruct those seeking to become members of the church.

This also impacts on the issue of confessional subscription. When confessions are subscribed, the function they fulfil is defining. However, not all confessions and certainly not all parts of the confession are equally suited to fulfilling a defining function. A poem reads differently from a law.⁸⁵⁶ This, I believe, is one of the reasons why the practice of subscribing the Three Forms of Unity has not always worked well.

⁸⁵⁵ Even the Canons of Dort, generally considered the most abstract, dogmatic or 'dry' of Dutch Reformed confessions, closes every chapter on a doxological note.

⁸⁵⁶ See Van Ruler, who saw confessions not as treatises but poems (2.11.2.5).

This present study has as its focus confessional subscription, and as such has had to look at the phenomena confessing and confessional writings. This has taken us to the breadth of the issue of confessions. However, in what follows I will restrict myself primarily to the defining function of confessions and how this may be given form judicially.

3.3.5.2 FIXING CONFESSING IN A CONFSSIONAL DOCUMENT

While many do not deny the need to confess, there is doubt concerning the necessity of writing confessions out and fixing them ecclesiastically. At this point, I have discussed those factors I believe contribute to the justification of fixing confessing in a confessional document. Hence I now turn to that issue.

First of all, because the confessing of the church is *communal* confessing, it needs to be fixed. Members of a community ought to be able to know what their community stands for. While it is true that in its confessing the church seeks to present the teaching of Scripture, Scripture itself cannot serve as the confession of the church. Scripture is the revelation of God's will, confessions form the exposition of man's faith.

Secondly, the functions that confessing fulfils in the church imply that its confession should be fixed with respect to its substance. Such fixation ensures that the church speaks with one mouth from a single heart in all times and all places: a confession must be catholic. Its song of praise is sound, its instruction is pure, and its boundaries are clear.

Hofstede de Groot considered the Belgic Confession of Faith a temporary testimony, the Heidelberg Catechism an instructional aid among many, and the Canons of Dort a necessary evil to assist Protestants in becoming accustomed to life free from the bonds of human decrees (2.5.2.5). During GS Dordrecht 1618-19, however, the foreign delegates expressed a very different opinion, namely, that the substance of the Reformed confession remain unchanged until Christ's kingdom come. Not without reason did the church for two hundred years enforce subscription. More evidence is needed if Hofstede de Groot is to be proven correct.

Thirdly, fixation of confessing does not remove the heart from confessing or reduce the fervour of confessing. The very fact that confessing is fixed is indicative of the earnestness with which the convictions are held. One commits to paper what one is certain about and what one does not want to be without. Fixation of a confession is thus an indication of the import of its substance.

3.3.5.3 SUMMARY

Confessions have been described with all sorts of images. The danger therein is that confessions are seen through the filter of the image and are disqualified on account of the image or on account of not fully relating to the image.

Confessions have a doxological function, a didactic function, and a defining function. Though confessions are often pressed into all these functions, their suitability to serve all ends is disputable. It would be advisable to pour the substance of the church's confessing into various moulds to various ends, though this does not necessarily mean that the substance of the church's confessing is to change. This observation has far-reaching implications for confessional subscription. I will return to it at a later point.

It is necessary for the church to fix its confessing and advisable for it to commit it to writing. For the church is a community, and its individual members ought to know what the community stands for. Moreover, in fixing its confession, the church expresses its catholicity in time. Finally, fixation makes clear how seriously the church takes its calling to confess its faith.

3.3.6 THE HERMENEUTICS OF A CONFSSION

When two persons say the same thing they need not mean the same thing. A word spoken one moment may have a different meaning at another moment (cf. 3.1.2.1). Confessions are written documents, often rooted in another era and another environment. This raises the question how one should read and interpret confessions: the hermeneutics of a confession.

Wiskerke (2.14.2.1.3) has written much on the contextual character of a confession. He pleaded strongly for reading confessions in the light of Scripture. It speaks for itself that his own remarks also stand in a particular context.

There are many factors that require attention here. From a substantive point of view: what is the relationship between a confession and Scripture, a confession and its original context, a confession and its user's context? From a formal point of view: which roles do the original and present confessors play? These are the aspects that will be looked at in what follows.

3.3.6.1 READING A CONFSSIONAL DOCUMENT

Confessions are expressions of communal faith that seek to repeat Scripture. Scripture is thus the norm for the substance of confessions. It makes sense, then, to read the confession in the light of Scripture.

However, one must realize that the confession is drawn up in a different environment from the ones that gave rise to Scripture. The words and phrases found in confessions are used in the way understood by the confessor. Since confessions are the fruit of theological reflection, the terms used may be more limited in meaning in the confessions than in Scripture. Their meaning may even be quite different. Further, there are terms in the confessions that cannot be traced back directly to Scripture.⁸⁵⁷

This indicates that the original context needs to be taken into consideration in coming to understand a confession. By original context I mean the context that produced the confession and the circumstances under which the confession was ecclesiastically fixed. The point of fixation itself is inadequate if the confessional document has its roots elsewhere.⁸⁵⁸ In fact, one may even have to go further than the original text of the confession.⁸⁵⁹ It is one of the tasks of the field of symbolics to research the origin of confessional texts.

There are confessions that seem almost timeless, even in their form. The ecumenical creeds have proved to serve adequately for centuries in a variety of ways. However, confessions also frequently function for ends for which they were not originally written. This implies that the practice of confessions also plays a role in understanding what a confession says.⁸⁶⁰

Moreover, in general, confessions are appropriated as a whole, not in their several parts. In the course of time, confessions may be refined on certain points.⁸⁶¹ The role of such refinements is important for understanding the text of the confession as it presently functions.

Finally, the confession stands as the confessing of the church today. Da Costa argued that the strength of a confession lies in its freshness (2.6.2.6). Groen van Prinsterer pointed out that it is *confessing* that gives the *confession* meaning (2.7.2.4). In the present, a certain point in the confession may be felt to be more important than in the past, and conversely, another point may be less in the foreground.⁸⁶² Moreover, the church today confesses. This implies, as Volten noted, that a confession must be immediately clear, at least to all those who hold it (2.12.2.3).

⁸⁵⁷ Two examples: 'regeneration' in the confessions refers to conversion, but in Scripture can also refer to the Return of Christ (Matthew 19:28); the term 'Trinity' (Athanasian Creed, art. 26) is not found in Scripture.

⁸⁵⁸ When the Belgic Confession was ecclesiastically fixed, it was reduced in length. As a result, important elements have dropped out of the text. For example, in BC art. 14 the words parenthesized in what follows were deleted, "which are sufficient to make man inexcusable, (but not sufficient to make him find God,) since all in him is darkness, as the Scripture teaches us in John 1:5 where John calls mankind darkness." The deletion of "but not sufficient to make him find God" has removed the reference point for the clause beginning with "since".

⁸⁵⁹ In order to understand the Belgic Confession, one needs to go back to the Gallic Confession, and even further back to Calvin's *Institutes*. In this process, one may eventually even end up with the church fathers. For example, the phrase "outside the church there is no salvation" goes back to Origen. See Mink, *Buiten de Kerk...*, Van Rongen, *The Church*, 77-90.

⁸⁶⁰ Since this applies to all texts, this point is perhaps best illustrated by the functioning of FS-1852 before and after 1883. Prior to 1883, FS-1852 was to be seen in the light of FS-1816. After 1883, the introduction of FS-1883, a return to FS-1852 would mean reading it in the light of FS-1883. The same text would then read much stricter.

⁸⁶¹ There are, for example, a number of versions of the Westminster Confession. Likewise, BC art. 36 has been substantially altered by the GKN in 1905.

⁸⁶² An example of the former is the doctrine of revelation and of the latter is the doctrine of the sacraments.

3.3.6.2 CONCLUSION AND APPLICATION

I thus conclude that confessions ought to be understood in the light of Scripture: its origin and history, and its present context. In fixing its confessing, the church should attempt to articulate its faith as accurately as possible and as closely as possible in keeping with the doctrine found in Scripture. It is the task of the field of symbolics to fulfil this scientific endeavour.

Although the phrase 'the way of the confessing' may be considered vague and indefinite, there is a positive side to it. To consider the confession of the church permanently fixed is an error. There is a 'way' down which the confessing of the church travels.

From a formal point of view, the filters of the original confessors and the present-day confessors should also be taken into consideration. What objectively is said by a confession in its original context, may not necessarily be what the original confessor had intended to say, though convinced that it was being said. The same can be said for the present-day confessor. Hermeneutics always has a subjective side to it, and such subjectivity may lead to understandings of a confession at odds with the original authors. I believe it is important that this subjectivity be reduced as much as possible in fixing a confession. For confessions should be objectively as clear and lucid as possible. Of course, it will remain true that our knowing, and thus our confessing, is in part and that sin may cloud our understandings.

Such subjectivity might be reduced by submitting confessional concepts to a variety of people and having them record in their own words how they understand the text. This will help refine the text to say what it is intended to say, no more and no less.

During discussions on BC art. 36 (2.10.2.2.1) the question was raised whether the confession is to be unequivocally clear or to be open to multiple interpretations as long as all interpretations are acceptable.⁸⁶³ Rephrased, just as on the grounds of Scripture *theologoumena* exist, can there be deviating understandings of confessional material? Given the character of a confession, I would suggest that confessional documents, certainly those of the first layer, should be unequivocally clear and not open to multiple interpretations. Where multiple interpretations are considered possible and permissible, the church should refrain from fixing the matter in its confessing. The most the church can do is to confess that multiple stances are possible.

The Synod of Dort was thus, in my opinion, correct in not explicitly taking a stance on infralapsarism and supralapsarism, and also acted properly when it explicitly implied that there are varying thoughts on the nature of the 'light of nature' (cf. CoD 3-4:4).

Similarly, the doctrinal decisions of 1905 were, from a structural point of view, within the bounds of the confession. With respect to BC art. 36, the debate was not regarding two permissible understandings of the later deleted phrase, but regarding a view that was permissible and a view considered unscriptural. In such a situation it is proper for the church to amend its confessing.

The nineteenth century Groninger defence of their confessional fidelity (2.6.2.4) lacks credibility, a fact proven by their attempts to have the form of subscription changed.

3.3.7 THE RELEVANCE OF A CONFESSION

To what extent does a confession speak for those who hold it? One might think that the answer is: fully. But what if such a confession is hundreds of years old, and tackles issues in a way foreign to the confessor's context? It is necessary to look at the relevance of a confession.

There are two sides to the issue of confessional relevance. Firstly, a confession must relate to the context in which it is uttered. As Groen van Prinsterer indicated, true confessing is uttering one's convictions where it may be accompanied with suffering (2.7.2.5). Secondly, a confession must relate to the convictions of the confessor. This second point may seem superfluous because the confessor creates the confession. It is not superfluous, however, because ecclesiastical confessing tends to pass on from generation to generation. Most generations in the church do not *articulate*

⁸⁶³ The question is older. For already the Groningers justified their teachings as Reformed by indicating that they used the same terminology as the confessions, they only understood them differently (2.6.2.4).

and fix their confessions but *appropriate* them. In this subsection, I will look at the relevance of a confession from these two perspectives.

3.3.7.1 RELEVANT TO THE CONTEXT

A confessional document is the *articulation* of faith: a confession says something. Its substance must then relate to something ‘out there’. That ‘out there’ is two-fold: it is the throne of God and the world at large.

Before the throne of God, the church confesses all that God gives it to confess. This confessing, however, is broader than that contained in confessional documents. It extends to the praise and prayer of the church, and to its activity in creation. It is not necessary for confessional documents to seek to be all encompassing on this score. For there is more to be confessed than could ever be contained on paper (Ps. 145:3). Although it must also be said that, in the context of the world, the church may feel an urge to confess a Scriptural truth without there being a direct reason for doing so.

In the world at large, the church is to express its convictions on matters that are at stake: be it anarchy in the sixteenth century or same-sex marriages in the twenty-first. There will also be issues that are more relevant at one time than another. One may here think of various heresies with respect to the Trinity, such as the teaching of Paul of Samosata, or the issue of slavery in a first-world context.

I therefore suggest that the criterion for the relevance of the substance of a confession is the context in which confessing takes place. As a consequence it is, theoretically speaking, possible for confessional substance to become outdated. Earlier I distinguished between thesis statements and antithetical statements in confessions (3.3.4.3.1). Thesis statements are the products of reflection on Scripture, antithetical statements tend to be initiated by particular circumstances. Thesis statements would thus be more relevant than antithetical statements.

It would, however, be going too far to argue that all thesis statements are always relevant in their original form, for thesis statements are often developed in opposition to a heresy. While the substance may continue to be relevant, it may prove necessary to re-word the confessed doctrine in order to meet the needs of a different time. I emphasize that even if the form is no longer relevant, the substance is. For confessing this substance is an expression of the catholicity and unity of the church in time. This would then be a second criterion for determining the relevance of the confessing: how it stands with respect to the catholicity of the church.

For example, the Remonstrant - Contra-Remonstrant debate is outdated. However, the substance of the debate continues to be an issue today. It would serve the cause of the Reformed world well if the Canons of Dort were rewritten to meet the challenge of Arminianism today.

Van Genderen (2.14.2.3) argues that the church can continue to confess what has been confessed in the past, for the confessing of the church is not determined by the questions of the world. This is indeed so, but then the confessing of the church will need to be abstracted from the questions of the world that first elicited it. The church should never reject something it has confessed in the past (unless the substance thereof should prove to be contrary to Scripture). However, the church may change the way in which it confesses the same substance. On this score, Den Hertog’s considerations (2.14.2.9) are well worth taking note of.

3.3.7.2 RELEVANT TO THE CONFESSOR

A confessional document is an articulation of *faith*: there is a confessor. Its substance must then relate to the faith of the confessor. With respect to ecclesiastical confessing, the issue is especially how individual church members as confessors relate to the confessing of the church. Further, confessional documents are generally appropriated rather than written. This fact can also throw up a barrier between the confessor and the confession.

To begin, the confessing of the church is not to be the sum total of all the convictions of its members, or the set of common convictions among its members. The confessing of the church is that which the church feels the need to express before God’s throne and the world, and against which there is no opposition in the church.

The following situations are then imaginable. An individual may believe ‘less’ than what the church confesses. In this case, the confessor will consider elements of the confession irrelevant. An individual may also believe ‘more’ than what the church confesses. In that case the confessor will consider the confession inadequate on points. In general, the situation is more complex: a confessor will consider the confession to go too far on some points and to say too little on other points. By way of example, the Three Forms of Unity may be considered inadequate with respect to the doctrine of marriage and verbose with respect to the doctrine of the sacraments.

The relevance of a confession will also be drawn into question when it states something in a way that is not quite how the confessor believes it ought to be confessed. For example, some feel the implications of the fourth commandment should be spelled out in more detail. It can also happen that a confessor agrees with the substance of what is confessed but not the tone in which this takes place. For example, labelling the Roman mass a ‘blasphemous idolatry’ meets with much opposition.

These observations indicate a third criterion for the relevance of confessions. A confession should relate to an urge within the confessor (the church and its members) to express his conviction.

The biggest problem then is that confessional documents have become outdated. However, existing confessional documents may be made relevant in various ways. The church may draw up a list indicating which confessional substance it does not hold.⁸⁶⁴ The church may draw up a quasi-confessional document.⁸⁶⁵ The church may alter the character of the binding to the confession (cf. 3.4.6).⁸⁶⁶ The church may add to or alter the text of the confession itself.⁸⁶⁷

I have already suggested that the body of confessional substance of the church be poured into various moulds (3.3.5.1). I here add that it would be advisable for the church to create moulds that lend themselves to keeping the confessing of the church relevant.

3.3.7.3 CONCLUSION

In summary, a confessional document needs to be relevant to both the context in which it operates and the confessor who holds it. This context is two-fold: the throne of God and the world at large. The confessor is in the first instance the church, and in it all its members. The criteria for the relevance of a confession are especially the circumstances of the moment, the catholicity and unity of the church, and the urge felt by the confessor, the church, to confess a particular matter.

In 3.3.4.3.2, I indicated that I would yet return to the issue of criteria by which one might decide whether a doctrine belongs to the more fundamental doctrines or not. One such criterion would, in view of the foregoing, be the relevance of the matter in the present age and circumstances.

3.3.8 THE AUTHORITY OF A CONFESSION

With respect to the issue of confessional subscription, one of the more direct matters affecting the issue is the question regarding the authority of a confessional document. How might its authority be characterized and described? What are the consequences of its authority? It is one of the issues that is continually present in debates and reflection on confessions and subscription to them. In this subsection, I wish to explore various aspects to this issue. I will first look at how the relationship between Scripture and confession impacts on this point (3.3.8.1). Next I will pay

⁸⁶⁴ See the Adopting Act of 1729 (various essays in Hall, *Practice*) and the Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland (RPCI, *Testimony*).

⁸⁶⁵ See *Geloofsgetuigenis* (2.12.2.7.5), “Our World Belongs to God” of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (www.crcna.org/pages/our_world_main.cfm), or the Position Papers of the Reformed Church in the United States (http://www.rcus.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=66&Itemid=208).

⁸⁶⁶ See the SoW-process and the PKN. The GKN[s] at one point expressed its preference for this route to changing the confession (2.12.2.7.5).

⁸⁶⁷ Think of the Canons of Dort as appendix to BC art. 16, the Walcheren Articles, and the deletion from BC art. 36.

attention to the relationship between confessor and the confession (3.3.8.2). Finally, I will review the extent of the authority of a confession: does it apply to all its components or not (3.3.8.3).

3.3.8.1 CONFESSION AND SCRIPTURE

In 1834, Groen van Prinsterer referred to Scripture as *norma normans*, the standardizing standard, and the confession as *norma normata*, the standardized standard (2.5.2.10). This was to indicate, on the one hand, that the confession has normative authority and, on the other hand, that the confession is not a norm in itself but has Scripture as its norm. This description—which is found frequently during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—seeks to sail between the Scylla of aligning divine revelation and ecclesiastical tradition and the Charybdis of a biblicist rejection of the ecclesiastical tradition.

Strictly speaking, this description overlooks the fact that between Scripture and the confession stands the faith of the confessor. A confessional document is not simply the echo or summary of divine revelation. I have defined confessing as the public statement of a conviction of faith. The doctrine of Scripture passes through the filter of the heart of the confessor (whether the heart of a person or the communal heart of the church) before it is articulated as doctrine in a confessional document.

The faith of the confessor as it stands between Scripture and confession is the link that determines the strength of the chain, for a chain is as strong as its weakest link. The confessor is a human being or group of human beings, trying to verbalize divine truths. Moreover, the confessor is a being under attack from sin, seeking to verbalize holy matters. The filter of the confessor has direct influence on the passage of authority from Scripture to confession. To argue that confessions derive their authority from Scripture is to say too little. Even the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer and the church is insufficient to sustain this. For Scripture is the source of faith, and faith is the source of confessing.

It is true that the substance of a confession should always be conformed to divine revelation. Substantively or ideally, a confession has authority because it reflects divine revelation. However, this does not mean that a confession is identical to divine revelation. It is an expression of the confessor's faith. One may even go so far as to say that the true standard for the confession, the *norma normans*, is not Scripture, but the faith of the confessor. And the *norma normans* for the faith of the confessor is Scripture.

As a consequence, the Reformed would do well not to refer to the confession as simply the *norma normata* with Scripture as the *norma normans*. While I can appreciate and certainly approve of what Groen van Prinsterer—and many with him—have tried to say by these terms, I believe such designations do not accurately reflect the situation and may give cause for misunderstanding. It would be better to speak of the confession as the *norma normata semper normanda*, the standardized standard that should be continually standardized. Similarly, I believe that the simple phrase 'Scripture and confession' as often used in Reformed circles is likewise misleading. For it suggests that Scripture and confession stand equal in their authority or are closely linked. This is, however, not the case. The authority of Scripture is absolute and divine, whereas the authority of a confession is not only relative or derivative but also human.⁸⁶⁸ It is with good reason that the delegates from Overijssel were asked to explain their mandate in 1618 (2.2.2.4).

3.3.8.2 CONFESSION AND CONFESSOR

Authority has two sides to it: one may speak of inherent authority and acknowledged authority. Something may have authority by virtue of what it is. However, such authority is meaningless if it

⁸⁶⁸ See further 3.3.8.3.2. I thus agree with, among others, Capadose (2.4.5.5) and Van Genderen (2.11.2.6).

is not acknowledged by those subjected to this authority. This matter also plays a role when it comes to the authority of confessions.

If, as I indicated earlier, the authority of a confession is not to be directly linked with Scripture but must pass through the filter of the confessor, does this then imply that its authority is subjective? Formally speaking, the answer is yes. For confessions are the written record of confessing. Confessing, in turn, is the articulation of faith convictions. These faith convictions ought to reflect the height and depth and breadth and length of the Spirit; they ought to exhale the spirit of divine revelation. The fact of the matter is, however, that confessions do not necessarily do so. They are spirits that must be tested (1 John 4:1), prophesying what ought to be judged (1 Cor. 14: 29).

Hence the substance of the confession is not the only factor in determining the authority of the confession. Instead, the authority of a confession is determined also by the confessor. For a confession is authoritative in so far as the confessor allows it or acknowledges it to be authoritative. This is what one might call the formal side to the authority of a confession.

In 1999, the issue of the authority of a confession was debated by Kamphuis and Dekker (2.14.2.10). Kamphuis noted that a confession is contingent, thus implicitly questioning the authority of confessions. Dekker argued that the authority of a confession is not dependent on Scripture or the church but on the Person of God. Both lines of reasoning make clear that it is the confessor—whether in reaction to his context or his reaction to his God—who shapes the confession and determines the character and extent of its authority.

Since my interest is in the functioning of ecclesiastical confessing, yet more needs to be said. The confessor in this picture is not, in the first place, the individual believer, but the church as a body of believers. My interest is the church that teaches Scripture and fixes the confessions. The fact that the church is confessor implies that the authority of the confessions is not subjective in the sense that it may be individually determined. The authority of a confession is first of all ecclesiastical. The *norma normans* of the confession is the faith of the church.

Berkhof correctly questioned the authority of confessions on this point (2.11.2.4). However, I cannot agree with Berkhof when he argues that distinguishing the objective and subjective authority in the confession is itself subjective, undermining the authority of the confessions. With Den Hartogh (2.11.2.4) I would point out that the body judging this is not the individual but the church. The task of the church on this score is not merely pragmatic ‘to prevent chaos’, but relates directly to the divine mandate of the church to confess.

In saying that the authority of a confession is ‘first of all’ ecclesiastical, I imply that there is another aspect to this authority as well. Besides deriving its authority from the church as confessor, a confession also derives authority from the person who appropriates the confession of the church. This, however, brings us in the sphere of binding to a confession. Hence I will look further into this in a later section (3.4.6).

3.3.8.3 THE EXTENT OF AUTHORITY

The question frequently arises as to the extent of the authority of ecclesiastical confessing. Van Velzen considered the confessions not only authoritative in their substance but also in their form (2.7.2.4). Scholten suggested that what is binding is not what the confessions say but what the confessions *intend* to say (2.7.2.6). Groningers, Ethicals and Barthians have emphasized the power or attitude expressed in a confession as opposed to its substance. Berkouwer considers the ground-motif authoritative, not the framework in which it is presented (2.12.2.4). The *quia-quotenus-quippe* debate attempted to draw a line within the substance of the confessions (2.4.5.6, 2.5.2). Diermanse has systematized the approach of fundamental and non-fundamental articles, preferring to speak of the centre and the periphery (2.12.2.8). How far does the authority of a confessional document extend?

I will explore this issue in what follows. I will do so by evaluating the various approaches. In doing so, I will at times reach forward to the following chapter on subscription, since the style of subscribing is indicative of the authority of a confession.

3.3.8.4.1 *Substance and Form*

It is most commonly asserted that confessions are binding in substance and not in form. Substance is then considered to be what the confession says, and form the way in which the confession presents it. In analysing the distinction previously (3.3.4.3.2), I have already indicated that substance and form are not easily distinguished. As Van Velzen noted, not only the substance but also the form contains a message. Formal elements in the confessions can have substantive implications.

An approach developed in America and not found in The Netherlands is that associated with 'system subscription'.⁸⁶⁹ The subscriber binds himself to the 'system of doctrine in the confessions'. It is permissible to question a doctrine confessed as long as the 'system of doctrine' is not brought into danger. However, what this 'system' is and comprises is undefined. This, in turn, means that the authority of a confession is undefined. The practical application of this form of subscription determines what it actually means.

While both the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in America practise 'system subscription', it is commonly accepted that the OPC is stricter in its subscriptional practice than the PCA. This makes clear that 'system subscription' as a stance is also vague.

I conclude that the distinction substance-form is not helpful when it comes to determining the authority of confessional documents.

3.3.8.4.2 *Primary and Secondary Substance*

Differentiation within the substance of the confessions is also common in debates. Generally, a distinction is made between fundamental articles and non-fundamental articles of faith. Often a reference is made to Calvin, though it needs to be said that Calvin spoke not of fundamental and non-fundamental but of *fundamental* and *not-so-fundamental* articles of faith.⁸⁷⁰ The distinction is slight, but it does indicate that all articles of faith have authority. The point is that for Calvin some have more authority than others.

Groen van Prinsterer followed a route that is, I believe, frequently misunderstood. He differentiated within the substance of a confession. It is the context in which one confesses that determines how important the substance is. In certain contexts, a particular substance need not be at issue.

Diermanse has suggested working with a scale of substance. He argued that there are central truths and peripheral truths. Though confessions will not contain all truths, they will contain more than central truths.

The problem with all three approaches is that criteria are lacking by which one might determine the nature of an article of faith.⁸⁷¹ What makes an article fundamental? When is a matter contextually important? How can one see whether a matter is central or peripheral? That substantive distinctions are justified is clear. Is the border like the permafrost line of the tundra: we know it exists but it can never be pinpointed because it is constantly shifting (cf. 2.8.2.3)?

During the course of my own reflection, I have considered describing the body of confessed doctrine as an organism. A living organism has members, each with their own function. An organism can function without certain members, although its functioning is inhibited. A person can live without an arm, but not without a heart. There are articles of faith that compare to the heart and there are articles of faith that compare to an arm or a toenail. In some ways this incorporates the 'system' approach of North America, though it exchanges the more mechanical-logical approach for an organic approach. In the end, I have rejected this approach. For here too the question is, which criteria exist to identify the character (and thus authority) of an article of faith; what makes something an arm or a heart?

One may consider several criteria.

⁸⁶⁹ See Hall, *Practice* for further information on this type of subscription.

⁸⁷⁰ See Calvin, *Institutes*, IV:i.12.

⁸⁷¹ Think of Barger's question to Groen van Prinsterer during the 1860s: why the indefinite "a confession" and not the definite "the confession". See note 353.

The most obvious is the relationship between an article of faith and divine revelation. If it is unequivocally and indisputably taught by Scripture, it has authority. In this approach one will also have to take into account that teachings of Scripture weigh differently. The drinking of wine for one's health (1 Tim. 5:23) is of a different order from the virgin birth of Christ (Luke 1:34-35).

A second criterion is the catholicity of an article of faith. If an article of faith has been held by the church throughout many ages and in many places, its authority is greater. However, this authority is not absolute. One must be careful not to fall into historicism.

A third criterion is that, formally, the article of faith is a positive thesis statement concerning reality. All other forms have less authority. By way of illustration, the statement 'God exists' has more authority than the argument 'for his hand is visible in world history' or the proof-text Heb. 11:6. This is not to say that other forms have *no* authority. On the contrary, to the extent that other forms affect the validity of an article of faith, they have authority. By way of illustration, the argument 'because the covenant has not changed from the Old Testament to the New Testament, children can also belong to the covenant and those that do ought therefore to be baptized' is authoritative. However, the statement 'Because a king cannot be without subjects' (BC art. 27) is not authoritative. This also means that while a single proof-text for an article of faith is not authoritative, the combination of the proof-texts is. For, by definition, an article of faith must be founded on Scripture (formally speaking, on at least one passage).

A fourth criterion is the dependence of an article of faith on an other article of faith, what the Westminster Confession refers to as 'by necessary consequence'. In general, antithetical statements fall in this category. By way of illustration, because we confess the total depravity of man, we reject the teaching of Pelagius that man is by nature good. Such an article of faith has authority, but its authority depends on the authority of the positive thesis statement.

In conclusion, one cannot argue that the confessions are not authoritative. However, it is justified to differentiate within the confessions with respect to the authority of its various parts.

I hasten to add that I speak ideally. When the foregoing is applied to existing confessions, one need also take into account that all that is found within the confessions may not necessarily be confessional material but should, perhaps, belong to the *theologoumena*. This makes the issue much, much more complicated.

3.3.8.4.3 Attitude—Substance

In various ways, Groningers, Ethicals, and Barthians have distinguished between the substance of the confessions and their force, their tone, and their spirit. Because they focussed more on the confessor than the confession (made clear by a preference for the *verbal* 'confessing'), the distinction in fact is the attitude of the confessor and the substance of his confession. For Groningers, this distinction arose from the discrepancy between their convictions and the convictions of the church, and at the same time a desire formally to remain within the confessing of the church. For Ethicals and Barthians, this distinction had a more principle root. They considered reality to be life and activity, and considered confessional documents to be dead and fixed. Later in the twentieth century, these positions merged in a move from an emphasis on ontological truth to functional truth (cf. Graafland, 2.14.2.4).

There is merit, I believe, in the emphasis on the attitude of the confessor or the fervour of the confession. While it is true that fervour for a particular article of faith is often determined by circumstance, this nonetheless does not mean that fervour itself is meaningless with respect to authority. What does it mean to us today that the confessions have often been paid for with the blood of martyrs?

However, one cannot limit the authority of a confession to this attitude or fervour. There have also been martyrs on account of heresies. I hold that the substance of a confession is binding because its substance is ultimately derived from Scripture (3.3.8.1).

3.3.8.4.4 *Motif—Framework*

Berkouwer suggested that the motif of the confessions should be considered authoritative but not the framework in which it is poured. Motif here relates to a combination of attitude and substance, what one wants to confess, while framework is the substance and the form that results, what one actually confesses (cf. 2.12.2.4.).

In view of the fact that existing confessional documents are far from perfect, there is something to be said for this approach. It makes one aware of the imperfections that exist in confessional documents.

One may, however, question the distinction made. Is not the choice of framework an expression of the motif? While another generation or another culture may see a matter differently because of a different thought process, this can never undermine the substance of what is confessed. At the most, it can obscure the substance. If one believes a ‘framework’ is incorrect, a substantive discussion should take place.

As an illustration, Berkouwer used the doctrine of election and its ‘logical’ partner the doctrine of reprobation. He felt that the doctrine of election rightly emphasized the sovereignty of God, but that the doctrine of reprobation was incorrect. However, since the scheme ‘election-reprobation’ was merely the framework for the doctrine of God’s sovereignty (the motif), Berkouwer did not consider it necessary to have the confessions of the church changed on this point. This is odd, to say the least. Does not denying the doctrine of reprobation influence one’s understanding of the doctrine of election?

Further, the distinction would not seem workable, for it presumes that another generation or culture is able to understand what the confession really *should* have said. This approach in fact proves to be similar to Scholten’s approach: it is not what the confession says that is authoritative but what the confession *wants* to say. In the end, it means that the confessor today will lord it over the confessor of yesterday.

Thus, while one may appreciate the distinction pointed out by Berkouwer, his solution is inadequate. Rather than envelop confessional documents in a cloud of supposed motifs, the present generation would be better served by a revision of the confessional document.

3.3.8.4.5 *Conclusion*

There are no reasons to suggest that parts of confessions ought not to be authoritative at all. As expressions of faith considered to be founded on Scripture, they bear authority. However, not all parts of a confession are equally authoritative. Positive thesis statements drawn unequivocally from Scripture have the highest authority.

3.3.8.5 CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION

Confessions are authoritative because of their link to Scripture. However, this link is not direct, as the references to Scripture as *norma normata* and confessions as *norma normans* suggest. Confessions articulate the faith of the confessor, and this faith stands as a link between Scripture and the confessional document. The authority of a confession is determined not only by its supposed Scriptural substance, but also by the faith of the confessor. The confessor is the church. It is by articulating, appropriating, and adopting confessional materials that the church gives confessional statements their authority. This is the formal side to the authority of a confession. However, it also relates to the substantive side of its authority. For a confession is substantively authoritative because it is *considered* to reflect Scripture. It is the factor ‘the faith of the church’ which disallows confessions from claiming absolute authority. Finally, existing confessions are not equally authoritative in all their aspects.

The problem is that in the foregoing I speak with a confession in mind that is true to Scripture and does not contain *theologoumena*. However, such a confession does not exist. Confessions are human products. In bringing to expression an article of faith, confessions may include elements that ought not to be included, use lines of argument that are insufficient or not valid, and use phrasing that does not quite reflect divine revelation. Moreover, in uttering divine truths, humans

can but stammer. The human link between Scripture and confession should thus not be forgotten. Existing confessions are not immune to criticism. This is what can be appreciated in the thoughts of Calvin, Groen van Prinsterer, Berkouwer, and Diermanse, to name just a few. I believe, however, that armed with this knowledge, a serious attempt should be made to reassess the Reformed confessional heritage and update it. That will be the issue in 3.3.9.

Before I turn to this, one loose end needs to be tied up. In 3.3.4.3.2, I indicated that in 3.3.7 and 3.3.8 I would return to the issue of criteria for determining to what extent a doctrine may be considered to be 'more fundamental'. In 3.3.7, I suggested as a criterion the relevance of the doctrine to the time and situation of the confessor. In view of the foregoing, a second criterion may be noted: namely, how is a matter presented in Scripture. One may think here of the clarity with which a matter is taught in Scripture, and the fervency with which it is taught. For example, the matter of the resurrection is of utmost importance, while the precise stipulations in the keeping of the New Testament day of rest would be of less importance.

3.3.9 SUBSTANTIVE MUTATION OF CONFESSIONS

Thus far, I have come to conclusions such as the following. Confessions are not to be maintained but continually conformed. The authority of confessions is not absolute. Confessions are not immune to criticism. Such conclusions imply that substantive mutation of confessions is warranted. In this section, I wish to look further at this matter. I will first look at criteria for substantively changing confessions (3.3.9.1). Next I will pay attention to the sorts of changes that might be made: reduction, alteration, and addition (3.3.9.2). Finally, I will look at the issue of new confessing (3.3.9.3).

3.3.9.1 CRITERIA

In view of what has been written about the functions of confessions (3.3.5), I propose a number of criteria in relation to changing confessional documents. There are fundamentally two criteria.

When the church considers changing the body of its confessions, there needs to be a clear picture of what the confession sets out to achieve. What will be the primary function of the new piece of confessional writing? How does the matter that is to be confessed (or is no longer to be confessed) relate to this function?

Secondly, the essence of the matter at issue must be carefully weighed. Is the matter of a substantive character and if so, in what way? What are the formal sides to the matter? Is the matter one that has far-reaching consequences, or is its effect limited?

When the function of what is to be confessed and its character is evident, the path to changing the confessing of the church is ready to be travelled. All the church now has to do is articulate the article of faith in keeping with its function and character, and fix it.

3.3.9.2 REDUCING, ALTERING, AND AUGMENTING

Among others, Van Genderen (2.11.2.6) has argued that confessions can never be reduced since this would mean cutting a confessional bond with the church in the past. However, in view of conclusions drawn with respect to the relevance of confessions, there should be room for the reduction of confessions.⁸⁷² It will be clear that primary confessional material can never be removed from the confessions. However, if certain material in the confession is not in keeping with its function and is considered to be insufficiently relevant to warrant separate attention, honesty demands that this be removed.

⁸⁷² Whether a church is *able* to substantially change its confession because of outside factors is not in view here. I do realize that, for example, Scottish Law prevents all churches with the exception of the Church of Scotland from altering its confessional standards. (With thanks to Rev. Dr. J. R. McIntosh of the FCS for pointing this out to me.)

By way of illustration, Lord's Days 28-30 are, as part of an instructional aid today, too specific. From a historical point of view this is understandable. But from a functional point of view the material is not helpful.

There are also matters in the confessions that are not of primary importance and, in addition, are not in keeping with present convictions concerning their truth. Such matters should also be edited out of the confessions.

One may think here of the Pauline authorship of Hebrews and the idea that the Ten Commandments were divided over the two tables of law in such a way that the first four were found on the one table and the second six on the other.

The church should not forget, however, that reduction does have the appearance of deviating from truths confessed in the past. For this reason, it would be advisable to keep reductions to an absolute minimum. Moreover, the removal of matter from the confession should not be considered to be a statement concerning the truth-value of other not-so-fundamental matters in the confession. For example, the rewriting of BC art. 4 so that the letter to the Hebrews is no longer attributed to Paul does not imply that all other authorship claims in art. 4 are binding; there are Reformed scholars who hold that the Song of Songs was not written by Solomon.⁸⁷³

The NGK had a tendency towards not perfecting the confessions. The GKN(v) tended to argue that the confessions should be perfected (2.14.2.1). However, since the 1960s, only two minor changes have taken place: the removal of the Johannine comma as proof-text for the Trinity, and the reference to Hebrews as having been written by Paul.

H. de Jong correctly points out that if the commonly accepted exegesis of texts changes, this has repercussions for the confessions (2.14.2.5).

One can also change the text of the confessions. On this score, the same can be said as for the reduction of confessions. Changing the confession will mean strengthening the confession on a point. If changing the confession means loosening up a formulation that is too tight, one should only do this if absolutely necessary.

There may also be moments when a church feels the need to confess a new matter or re-address an old issue in new terms. That the church has the task to confess is clear. The question is, however, whether such new confessing would do justice to existing confessional documents, which also have a historical value. In practice, confessions are protected with even more fervour than national constitutions. Thus, while there ought to be room for new confessing, it is probably wise to do this in another format.

It might be advisable to create a new confession that actualizes the existing body of confessions. Thus the confessions of the Reformation period, rather than augmenting existing confession, produced new confessions that referenced the ecumenical creeds.⁸⁷⁴ The Testimony used by the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland may also serve as an example.⁸⁷⁵ It should be noted, however, that such approaches do not necessarily elevate new confessing to the level of old confessing.

3.3.9.3 NEW CONFESSING

Given the space of time since the last confessions were written, and the fact that confessions are often pressed into functions to which they are not quite suited, I believe churches today would be best off rewriting their confessional heritage. In the next subsection, I will describe how this might be accomplished (3.3.10). At this point, I give a brief systematic consideration of three relevant points and then interact with others on this issue.

⁸⁷³ It is interesting to note that the version of the BC art. 4 adopted by the GKN(v) continues to attribute Song of Songs to Solomon (GKN(v), *Gereformeerde Kerkboek* (2), 559), while the CanRC version avoids the whole issue by not mentioning Solomon's name in the article at all (CanRC, *Book of Praise*, 443).

⁸⁷⁴ Thus, for example, the Augsburg Confession in article 3, the Gallican Confession in article 5, the Belgian Confession in article 9, the Heidelberg Catechism in Lord's Day 7, the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England in article 8, and the Westminster Shorter Catechism, appendix *The Creed*.

⁸⁷⁵ RPCI, *Testimony*.

Firstly, Reformed Churches are convinced that the catholicity of the church implies the involvement of the church at large in rewriting the confessions. The Canons of Dort were written with the involvement of foreign theologians. In its wake, many have indicated that the worldwide church must be involved, among them H. de Cock (2.5.2.4), A. Kuyper (2.9.2.6) and the GKN (2.10.2.2.1,5). They are correct in pleading so. For the most fundamental doctrines of the church should be confessed by the church everywhere. And the whole church should, given the situation and time in which a local church finds itself, join that local church in its confessing in that same situation and time.

Secondly, in writing a new confession it should be borne in mind that concepts will not easily allow themselves to be caught in words and sentences. The author must be aware that the words at his disposal will shape the reality he is trying to articulate. The author must also be aware that the reality he is trying to describe may be beyond the words at his disposal.

Thirdly, confessional texts attempt to articulate divine concepts that are, in many ways, beyond the understanding of man and the limits of creation. Moreover, ours is a world darkened by sin, in which even those who truly believe have only a beginning of true obedience. Thus a confessional text produced by men in our era will never be immaculate, but always bear the marks of our limited and imperfect understanding.

In short, the writing of new confessions should involve the church across the globe. Secondly, in articulating its confession, the church should realize the limitations of language. Thirdly, in this imperfect and time-restricted world, an immaculate confessional text is unachievable.

3.3.9.4 INTERACTION WITH OTHERS

The idea of new confessing has caused much debate. Groen van Prinsterer touched a number of times on the issue: in 1834, he considered his age unsuitable for producing a new confession (2.5.2.10), and in 1847 he considered such a moment to lie ‘behind a huge mountain’ (2.7.2.2). Da Costa (2.6.2.6) and Van Toorenenbergen (2.7.2.5) considered such confessing possible. Much is made of the idea that confessions ought to be born (e.g. Kuyper, 2.9.2.6; GKN, 2.10.2.2.5; noted by Weijland, 2.13.1.2.9). Polman suggested that seeking a new confession was Barthian, and considered it in his time a ‘very dangerous experiment’ (2.11.2.1). In 1999, there were voices from within the GKN(v) arguing there should be expansion of the confessional substance (2.14.2.11).

I believe that substantial mutation of confessional substance should be an ongoing activity of the church. New confessing is part of being the church. I believe the church is always up to that task: if it is not, is it up to the task of being the church? Of course, the confessional product of one period will differ from that of another period. However, it would be wrong to think that a certain period is incapable of producing new confessional material. I have already argued in 3.3.4.2.3 that documents need not be born in an hour of need to qualify as confessions.

De Gier's objection to all types of changes to confessions (2.14.2.10) is, in my opinion, out of line. Suggesting that confessions are theoretically mutable but immediately declaring suspect all attempts at improvement suggests an improper view of the authority of confessions, one that comes close to that of Traditionalists like De Hoest cum suis.

Daubanton wrote of three sorts of revision: logical (relating to form), organic-confessional (relating to internal relations, the system), and biblical-theological (substantial) (2.10.2.1). Linguistic updates of confessions would be an example of logical revision, as the deletion of the phrase in BC art. 36 would be an example of biblical-theological revision. I doubt, however, whether all revisions can be exclusively characterized: the matters are too interlinked for this.

Kamphuis (2.14.2.11) notes that both the form and substance of confessions are to a great extent shaped by history. In his view this accidental side to confessional documents is presented as a positive factor that can be utilized in, for example, coming to new confessing. However, it is a negative factor for the judicial functioning of a confessional document. The more accidental and time-related a document is considered, the less clear it will be what is binding in it. New confessional documents should, therefore, seek to be as little time-related as possible.

Attempts at new confessing have been made in Dutch Reformed circles. The most deliberate and formal was that of the *Arnhemse Artikelen* (2.10.2.2.5). It failed because these articles did not substantially articulate the faith of the whole church. Attempts at changing the Heidelberg Catechism also failed (2.10.2.2.6), probably more out of fear of the unrest the introduction a new catechism would have provoked than for reasons of principle. Since then, this fear has proved unfounded: much course material for catechetical instruction reworks the material of the Heidelberg Catechism without ever having been officially adopted.⁸⁷⁶

3.3.9.5 SUMMARY

When considering changing the substance of its confessions, the church must carefully weigh that substance. Not only should its weight be determined in view of Scripture, the church should also take note what effect the change would have among its membership. The existing confessions can be reduced, altered, or augmented. However, it would be more advisable to come to a new body of confessional documents. This preserves the historical heritage intact—not only formally but also substantially—and yet gives room for the proper functioning of confessional documents in new times and different places.

3.3.10 NEW CONFSSIONAL DOCUMENTS

Given all the foregoing, it would probably be wisest for the church to write new confessional documents that absorb the old, are substantially equivalent to the old, and include issues that are relevant today. In view of the functions of confessions, it would be best to draw up three types of confessions that can serve in the three main functions. I reiterate that the church always has the right to draw up such confessions; confessions need not be born. In this last section on confessing and confessions, I will propose the formats for such new confessing and the path along which such confessing might be fixed.

3.3.10.1 FORMAT

Confessions fulfil three functions: doxological, didactic and defining (3.3.5). Along the lines of these three, three confessional documents could be drawn up. I imagine it becoming something like the following.

A **doxological confession** would be drawn up with a view to a liturgical setting. Practice makes clear that such a document is best created as poetry that can be set to music. This would be the confessional format that serves most to translate the emotive side to faith.

*The Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed have proven to work well in this way. One may also consider a rhymed version of the Apostles' Creed that contains much material from the Heidelberg Catechism. A rhymed version of the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism would also serve well.*⁸⁷⁷

A **declarative confession** would be made for kerygmatic, instructional, and pastoral purposes. The field of pedagogy could guide the church in formulating the confession adequately. Besides the use of (brief) questions and answers, one might also use schemes and other pedagogical instruments. In fact, this would mean writing a new catechism that would absorb the Heidelberg Catechism and elements from the Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dort, and touch on relevant issues today. The declarative format, much like the Heidelberg Catechism, would articulate both the teachings of Scripture and the faith-passion of the confessor.

A **defining confession** would be written for apologetic, uniting, and anti-heretical purposes. As such, this format is primarily rational. It would consist of a series of articles. Each article would deal with a single topic. It would begin with a positive thesis statement (we believe and

⁸⁷⁶ This phenomenon is paralleled in the world of law. Where the Dutch lawgiver is unable to articulate a matter in a law, it is practice and the judge which determines what can and what cannot take place. Typical examples are the Dutch approach to soft-drugs and euthanasia.

⁸⁷⁷ Such hymns already exist in both Dutch and English.

confess...). The substance of such a statement would be limited to Scriptural teaching and what can be derived by direct and necessary consequence from it. Such an article would next contain Scripture underpinning (for Scripture teaches...). It would then contain antithetical statements that are relevant to the church's context (we dispute and deny...). Here too, the church should limit itself to Scriptural teaching and that derived by direct and necessary consequence. Next, the article would indicate Scriptural proof for this denial (for Scripture teaches...). Finally, the article would contain concrete applications for the church's context. Such sentences could begin with 'we therefore accept...' and 'we therefore reject...'. These last sections are in fact the equivalent of doctrinal declarations. An article would thus have this format:

We believe and confess... (= thesis statement)

For Scripture teaches...

We dispute and deny... (= antithetical statement)

For Scripture teaches...

We therefore accept... (= 'local' application)

We therefore reject... (= 'local' application)

Earlier, I have defined three layers of confessing in the church and indicated that even within the first layer there is differentiation. In its stipulations on subscription, synods up to and including GS Dordrecht 1618-19 seem to have given priority to the Belgic Confession of Faith. Likewise, in the theoretical structure proposed above, the defining confession would be determinative for the other two. One might consider the defining confession to be judicially the ecclesiastical standard.

However, there are also layers in the articles of the defining confession. The local application would belong to the second layer of confessing as it is the application of the doctrines to the situation and context of the church confessing.

This format for the defining confession will also solve the problem noted earlier, namely, that the existing confessions are formally not suited for a strict approach to confessional subscription. The defining confession, as I have proposed it, would in fact come closest to the genre of law.

The doxological and declarative confessions would not contain material that is not found in the defining confession. Positively stated, all doctrine confessed in doxological and declarative confessions is found in the defining confession. For that reason, it will not be necessary to subscribe all three confessions (just as Dort did not consider it necessary to subscribe the ecumenical creeds). The doxological and declarative confessions are instruments to allow the church to confess its faith in the many different ways it needs to. Subscription need only be limited to the defining confession.

Of course, there are more sides to confessing than being doctrinally accurate. There is also the passion, the fervour of confessing, and the emotions and attitudes which the confessed doctrine brings with it. Faith is not just a matter of the mind; faith is as much a matter of the heart. The doxological confession might be considered the ecclesiastical accounting—the term 'standard' is not suitable here—that articulates its passion.

In this arrangement, the religion of the confession (a term often used within the Gereformeerde Bond) would primarily come to expression in the doxological confession. The problem with having it in the defining confession is that one cannot fix passion in words in the same way one can fix a conviction in words. How one might bind to this religion of the confession—a matter I consider appropriate—is a matter of testing a confessor over a period of time.

3.3.10.2 THE PROCESS

How might the church go about fixing its confessing in the format proposed above? At this point, I permit myself to dream, as many others have done before me. There is a difference though. Many before me have considered the time unripe; in Groen's words, 'to be beyond a huge mountain.' (2.7.2.2). I am not convinced that the church is incapable of writing a new confession or that the time would not be ripe. In fact, I am convinced that the church, in not reconsidering its confessional heritage, in not continually conforming this heritage to Scripture, so is shirking one of

its central duties. It is no longer acting as a bulwark, and is therefore bringing into danger its role as pillar as well.

I believe an approach such as the following could work well. I offer it in order to initiate reflection on this point. It is certainly open to refinement. In offering it, I am thinking primarily along the structures of the Church Order of Dort.

The church creates a standing committee ‘confessing’. This standing committee should comprise experts in the fields of language, theology, education, legislation, and liturgy, and persons who represent the general membership of the church (including ministers and elders). The standing committee would divide into three sections. The linguists, theologians, and legislators form the section ‘defining’, the educators and church members form the section ‘declarative’, and the experts in liturgy together with church members form the section ‘doxological’. The process for drawing up new confessional material in the existing structures of churches practising Dortian polity could be the following.

1. Section ‘defining’ formulates a confessional article. In doing so they will take careful note of extant confessional materials, not only from within their own church but also from other churches around the world with the same orthodox Reformed faith.
2. The standing committee as a whole approves the article. The article is submitted to general synod (1) for approval.
3. General synod (1) approves it in first reading and sends it to the classes (classes may decide whether to solicit input from local consistories)
4. Classes may submit amendments and comments to the standing committee.
5. The section ‘defining’ reformulates the article in accordance with comments received.
6. The standing committee approves the article as a whole.
7. Section ‘declarative’ formulates, if appropriate, a declarative version of the article.
8. Section ‘doxological’ formulates, if appropriate, a doxological version of the article.
9. The standing committee approves the confessional material in its three formats.
10. The material is submitted to general synod (2) for approval. If 75% of the classes are in favour of the initial article in principle, the new material may be adopted on second reading.
11. Synod releases the confessional material for a trial period in the churches and involves churches abroad in considering the material.
12. At the end of this trial period, the classes vote on the proposed articles. A classis must at least decide whether the articles can be adopted; it may also submit amendments to the synod.
13. If general synod (3) decides by absolute majority to consider the amendments, the matter is passed into the hands of deputies ‘confessing’ and the procedure goes back to 5.
14. If general synod (3) decides not to consider the amendments, the material is considered adopted with at least a 75% majority vote; it is considered to belong to the primary confessional material of the church (implying, among other things, subscription to it).
15. If general synod (3) decides not to consider the amendments and the vote to adopt the material is less than 75%, general synod may decide to pass the amendments into the hands of deputies ‘confessing’, and the procedure goes back to 5.

Since it belongs to the task of the church to conform its confessing to the norm of Scripture, it would seem wise to stipulate how this might be done in its church order. It is not necessary to prescribe the whole procedure just described. However, it is wise to fix key moments in the procedure.

The following text could suit these purposes:

A. Confessing

The church articulates its faith in confessional documents.

Systematic Part

It belongs to the tasks of the general synod to fix the text of the confessions of the [name of the association of churches]. In doing so it will involve the classes in first reading and the local churches and the sister churches in second reading. Once the text has been fixed, a confessional article is only adopted if 75% of the classes are in favour and if 75% of the synod members are in favour.

This process will, of necessity, need to be steeped in believing reflection on Scripture and prayer. Without the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, a process such as the foregoing is to no avail. On the other hand, it cannot be argued that such a process will hinder the workings of the Spirit of God.

In closing, I note that the process outlined above is not the only possible process. Chronologically speaking, it might well be that something of a doxological nature is appreciated as if it is a confession, or that a particular point being taught is considered important enough to receive confessional status. It is possible that because doxological or declarative documents are considered to have a confessional aspect to them, so the defining confession of the church will need to be augmented. This, however, is a process so multi-faceted that regulating it might become impracticable. The process I have just outlined does indicate which principles should be taken into consideration in such a process.

3.3.10.3 CONCLUSION

There is much doubt in Reformed churches whether the church is up to new confessing. However, does history not indicate that under the guidance of the Spirit the church may follow new roads? The time of the Great Reformation is known, among other things, for its production of new confessional material. The substance of those confessions has stood for four centuries, and I can personally agree with the foreign delegates at the Great Synod of Dort: this substance is to stand until the coming of Christ's Kingdom.

However, new times require new approaches; new wine requires new wineskins. Since the Reformation, much insight has been gained in the fields of theology, pedagogy, and liturgics. The Reformed churches have known many struggles over confessional subscription. Many of the problems encountered have been of a practical nature. The fact of the matter is that the Ecumenical Creeds and the Three Forms of Unity are not entirely suited to the functions in which they are pressed. This is most definitely true when it comes to subscription. This, and my experience as a Reformed pastor in teaching catechism, makes me so bold as to propose the foregoing. I do so, convinced that the church today is up to this task. I do so, moreover, because, with many others, I am convinced that the church has a divine mandate to confess its faith in the midst of the world in which it stands.

Dreams are usually of an ideal world. I realize full well that the procedure described above will not produce the perfect confession. However, I believe that the format I propose is much more suited to our rapidly changing times than the procedures we currently have. This format allows the church constantly to conform its confession to the standard of divine revelation and thus preserve the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

3.4 Subscription

I have now come to the final systematic aspect of my study on confessions and confessional subscription. From a systematic perspective, I have first reviewed several broader, framework-type aspects. I then considered the relationship between faith and doctrine, and what role they fulfil in the church context. This provided the context for an in-depth consideration of the phenomena of confessing and confessional documents. In this final chapter, I will consider various aspects of binding to such confessions.

As with the previous chapter, the process of setting this out is from the more abstract to the more concrete. I will first attempt to define the concept (3.4.1). Next, I will consider the goal of confessional binding (3.4.2) and reflect on its relationship to its counterpart, tolerance (3.4.3). Because ‘binding’ is a verb with an indirect and direct object—one binds ‘someone’ to ‘something’—I will explore these next (3.4.4 and 5). How the authority of confessional binding might be characterized is the question then reflected upon (3.4.6). This closes the more theoretical reflection. I then turn to the more concrete subject of how binding might be practised (3.4.7). Finally, the consequences of subscription will be reflected upon (3.4.8). Before closing, I will outline how subscription to a confession could be accomplished (3.4.9).

A troubling factor in what follows is that a dual line of argument will be followed. In the foregoing chapter, I have indicated that part of the problem with the functioning of confessions in the churches is that they are often pressed into functions to which they are not quite suited. I have therefore suggested the rewriting of the confessional heritage of Reformed churches in three documents along the lines of the functions that confessions fulfil (3.3.10). In this chapter I will indicate how binding functions with respect to one of these, the defining confession. However, it would be unwise to ignore the fact that the Three Forms of Unity are the confessions that are presently subscribed in practice. On this score comments will also be made.

I thus hope to avoid what often troubled debates during the nineteenth century, especially between Da Costa and Groen van Prinsterer, and in their wake Ethicals and Medical Calvinists on one hand and Juridical Calvinists and Traditionalists on the other. Given these debates, it would seem most advisable to take both an idealist and a pragmatic approach.

However, I have also come to realize that this is confusing for the reader. The reader therefore be warned: ‘the confession’ is ‘the defining confession’ and not the Three Forms of Unity or some other existing confessional document.

3.4.1 BINDING AND SUBSCRIPTION DEFINED

The Dutch verb ‘*binden*’ (‘to bind’) means to attach two or more objects to each other, to create a bond between two or more matters.⁸⁷⁸ In the context of this study, it refers to the relationship or attachment between church members—office bearers in particular—and the confessing and confessional documents of the church. The term ‘binding’ is a very general one with no technical connotations in the issue of confessions. I have used it to avoid connotative implications.

It is more common to use the verb ‘*ondertekenen*’ and its cognates. The Dutch ‘*ondertekenen*’ is popularly translated with the English ‘subscription’. There is a difference, however. The English term ‘subscription’ can imply a bond in which no ink has flowed from a pen: one need not write in order to subscribe. However, the Dutch term ‘*ondertekening*’ does imply a flow of ink; the term is more properly translated with the English ‘to sign’. During the nineteenth century the term ‘*onderschrijven*’ was used at times, which is probably a closer Dutch equivalent of ‘to subscribe’. However, it never became popular. The term seems only to have survived in the concept ‘*onderschrijvers*’ (subscribers).⁸⁷⁹ It could be that because the Dutch ‘*ondertekening*’ is a little narrower in meaning than the English ‘subscription’, where the English speak of ‘confessional

⁸⁷⁸ Van Dale, s.v. “*binden*.”

⁸⁷⁹ The difference between ‘*ondertekenaars*’ and ‘*onderschrijvers*’ is identical to the distinction between the English ‘signatories’ and ‘subscribers’.

subscription' the Dutch show a preference for the more general '*binding aan de belijdenis*' ('confessional binding'). Furthermore, the subject matter then clearly also covers those who are bound to the confessions but never subscribe them: those who are confessing members in the church but not office bearers.⁸⁸⁰

The Scots use the verb 'to own'. It would seem to be akin to the Dutch expression 'the religion of the confession' (cf. 2.11.2.4). This makes clear that being bound to an ecclesiastical confession is not just a matter of assent but of appropriation. This appropriation is moreover more than a social psychological phenomenon; it is appropriation in a manner similar to how spouses are one in marriage. The convictions confessed are evidence of a relationship with God.

The terms 'binding' and 'subscription' are synonyms denoting the same bond. The difference is that 'binding' looks at the bond from the perspective of the one demanding the bond ('the church binds to the confession'). 'Subscription' looks at the bond from the perspective of the one being bound ('the office bearer subscribes the confession').

Being bound to the confession implies more than a tie between a church member and the confessional substance of the church. In social psychological terminology (3.1.3), being bound to the confessing of the church intends appropriation. It generally means that an individual church member in his or her confessing moves along the lines of or in the way of the confessing of the church. The confession of the church is considered authoritative and determinative in one's life. One accepts that loyalty and fidelity to the church's confessing is commanded. Being bound to the confessing of the church implies that one's personal confession explicitly and consciously does not contradict the confessing of the church.

3.4.2 THE AIM OF BINDING

Why does the church profess a certain faith and bind to that faith? Why does an individual bind himself or allow himself to be bound to the confessing of the church? Why does a person acknowledge and confirm that he or she confesses the doctrine of the Bible, summarized in the confessions and taught in the church to be the true and complete doctrine of salvation? Why do office bearers by means of a form of subscription indicate that they consider and believe all the articles and points of doctrine contained in the confessions of the Church to agree in everything with God's Word? This subsection will seek to answer these questions. I will begin with a brief overview of what has been officially regulated over the course of time in Dutch Reformed circles (3.4.2.1). I will then look at binding as a declaration of faith (3.4.2.2). Next, I will consider binding in its relation to the task of the subscriber within the church (3.4.2.3). Finally, I will reflect upon confessional binding as an expression of the catholicity and unity of the church in time (3.4.2.4).

3.4.2.1 HISTORICAL DATA

Neither CO-1619 nor FS-1619 explicitly state the aim of binding. It was probably considered so obvious that no need was felt to formulate it. A hint is found, however, buried in FS-1619. At one point, the form deals with the question whether a subscriber must explain his thoughts when an ecclesiastical assembly requests this. FS-1619 then states that such a request may only be 'on account of serious reasons for second thoughts' with as its aim 'to preserve unity and purity in doctrine'. Later forms of subscription in the tradition of FS-1619 did not become more explicit on this point.

In AR-1816, the aim was explicitly worded. One finds it in the mandate for church boards, namely 'maintain the doctrine [of Christianity in general and the NHK in particular].' Another goal was to ensure a faithful ministry in the church. The former was not enforced by subscription, the latter was.

The synodical 'subscription' introduced by the CAGK in 1854 had as its goal to declare the confession of the congregations publicly.

⁸⁸⁰ Van Dale, s.vv. "onderschrijven," "ondertekenen."

The NGK inserted two quasi-confessional statements into FS-1994—the first on the duty of the congregation and the second relating to the calling of office bearers—to indicate the purpose of subscription. In 2004, AKS article 17 explicitly stated that subscription was ‘to show agreement with’ the doctrine of the church.

3.4.2.2 DECLARATION OF FAITH

The church is the assembly of believers, people who share the same faith convictions. Since the church identifies itself by its faith convictions, it is necessary that those who form it identify themselves by these same faith convictions. To this end, those wishing to become members with all the rights and privileges in the church are asked to express their agreement with the articulated confessing of the church.

Ideally speaking, the confessor would thus adopt the defining confessing of the church as his or her own, brought thereto via the didactic confessing of the church, and express his or her faith with the doxological confessing of the church. In Dutch Reformed practice, it means expressing agreement with that taught in Scripture as summarized in the Apostles’ Creed and as taught in the church in which one professes faith.⁸⁸¹

This binding is given form for the first time when someone professes his or her faith publicly and becomes a ‘confessing member’ of the church. It is individually reiterated, explicitly or implicitly, during the celebration of the sacraments, and ordination of office bearers.

This binding does not necessarily imply that the confessor fully understands all that the church confesses. It indicates that the confessor trusts the church in its confessing and submits to the confessing of the church. Further, the confessor does not consciously hold convictions that contradict the confessing of the church.

Van Ruler considered confessional church membership to depend not on having appropriated the confessing of the church but on indicating one’s readiness to appropriate the confessing of the church (2.11.2.5). De Reuver has gone a step further by legitimizing a large measure of confessional plurality within the church.⁸⁸² However, the original idea in Reformed circles behind ‘confessional membership’ is clearly that confessors have—to the extent of their ability—appropriated the confessing of the church.⁸⁸³

3.4.2.3 ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND PROMISE

Sometimes the question is posed: why should office bearers subscribe the confessions explicitly if they are already confessing members of the church? The answer is that the subscription of confessions by means of a form of subscription based on FS-1619 is not the declaration of faith according to that given in Scripture.⁸⁸⁴ Rather, it is an expression of the conviction that the doctrine found in the confessional documents of the church is in agreement with the doctrine of Scripture. Further, it is a promise to teach and defend this doctrine, to reject all that is contrary to it, and in dealing with doctrinal deviations, to abide by protocol and procedures agreed upon in the church. This is an important fact, often overlooked in debates on confessional subscription.

This is one of the major differences between FS-1619 and FS-1816. FS-1816 contained a profession of faith while FS-1619 did not.

The binding for office bearers via subscription is thus originally directly linked with the task or ministry to which they are called. It is in its office bearers that the church has its ‘face’. The office bearers represent the church. It is entirely appropriate that office bearers promise to maintain, propagate and defend the confessing of the church.

⁸⁸¹ See 3.4.4.2 for a discussion of being bound to what confessing.

⁸⁸² De Reuver, *Eén Kerk in Meervoud*.

⁸⁸³ Consider for example Micron’s “Brief Examination of Faith for those who want to join the congregation” (Micron, *Christlike Ordinancien*, 68-69), and the Compendium of Middelburg (Van Rongen, *Our Reformed Church Service Book*, 193-200).

⁸⁸⁴ Contrary to what Schokking suggests (Schokking, *Leertucht*, 199).

Doedes limited the scope of subscription to a contract or agreement to teach what the church teaches (2.7.2.8). This is too narrow, not only in view of the fact that the form of subscription contains an 'acknowledgement', but also because, in the Reformed tradition, at ordination one professes the faith confessed by the church.

3.4.2.4 CONTINUITY IN TIME

A third aim for binding to confessions may be described as 'to express the catholicity and unity of the church in time.' God's Word is unchangeable, and therefore is to be taught in all times and places. The church is united in the faith it has in God. The church is found everywhere, because the church in all times and places holds and teaches the same faith. By subscribing historic confessions, the church expresses its unity with the church in the past. By promising fidelity to the confessions in the future, the church expresses its unity with the church of the future.

This is especially important when it comes to understanding the subscriptional moment at the broadest assembly, the moment when the churches together profess their faith (3.4.7.7.3). It is less prominently in view when individual office-bearers subscribe the confessions. However, even then the link of the present with the past and the future is worth noting: there is not only a communion of saints in the breadth of the present but also in the length of history.

Thus, maintaining the doctrine of Scripture by confessing it in official documents and binding to such documents is an expression of the catholicity of the church in time.

3.4.2.5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Confessional binding may be considered to serve three goals. First of all, expressing agreement with the confession of the church is a public profession of one's personal convictions, a personal declaration of faith. One might call it the existential aim of confessional binding. Secondly, confessional binding is the explicit acknowledgement of and promise to abide by the confessions in one's official activity. This one might call the legal aim of binding. Thirdly, confessional binding ensures the catholicity and unity of the church in time.

The foregoing has made clear that in the Dutch situation there was originally a clear distinction between a declaration of faith and subscription to confessions via a form. The distinction became less clear after 1816 when the form of subscription itself became a profession of faith.

The aim of confessing has already been articulated in a proposed church order text. I would suggest that explicating the first two aims of binding in the Church Order is also appropriate. I point out that the second aim has a particularly legal side to it, whereas the first does not. The third aim need not be mentioned separately, as it is already found in the section on the confessing of the church. This might be worded as follows:

B. Binding to the confessing of the church

... are to express their agreement with the doctrine confessed and taught by the church at their admission by means of

... are to express their agreement with the doctrine confessed and taught by the church and promise to labour in keeping with this confessing at their ordination by means of ...

3.4.3 BINDING AND TOLERANCE

One of the most intricate and sensitive issues with respect to confessional subscription is the matter of binding and tolerance. When is one bound and when is one free? Donker Curtius alleged that FS-1619 had not clearly indicated this line. He noted that FS-1619 forbade secret discussions, but yet in practice such discussions did take place (2.5.2.11). One can also approach the question from the other side. When may one be a member of the church, when may one serve in office? GS The Hague 1914 indicated that it was possible for someone who was not fully convinced of the Reformed confessions still to be member of the church. Such a person could not, however, serve in office (2.10.2.2.3).

In this subsection, I wish to explore the issue of binding and tolerance further. First, I will indicate why confessional binding is necessary (3.4.3.1). I will then seek to define the concept of

‘prophetic liberty’, the counterweight to binding (3.4.3.2). Next, I will explore the nature of the dividing line between binding and tolerance (3.4.3.3). Finally, I will look at what I have termed ‘situational tolerance’.

Whether the line is drawn differently for various types of people will be looked at in subsection 3.4.5.

3.4.3.1 THE NECESSITY OF BINDING

Scripture clearly indicates the need for the maintenance of its doctrine (cf. 3.2.5). Binding to confessions has proved a very useful and workable way to ensure this. Confessional binding is not absolutely necessary, as if to say that a church without confessional binding cannot be a church. Nevertheless, binding individuals to the confessing of the church is a very proper way for the church to hold fast what was once for all delivered to the saints.

*Rom. 12:6, which refers to the ‘rule of faith’ or ‘standard of faith’ (*analogia fidei*), is often referred to in discussions on the propriety of confessional subscription. The CGKN looked at this text in depth in the context of the Berkhoff-case in 1933 (cf. 2.10.2.5). They were unsure that referring to the body of doctrines taught by the church (in more modern times the confessions) as ‘the rule of faith’ was in line with the concept as used in Rom. 12:6. I would agree that the usage is indeed questionable⁸⁸⁵ and, to avoid confusion, would discourage the use of the phrase ‘rule of faith’ or ‘standards’ for confessional documents not necessarily intended to be such.*

Confessional binding is considered so normal that the International Conference of Reformed Churches requires of its members not only to indicate what its confessional standards are, but also to indicate the practice of confessional subscription.⁸⁸⁶

3.4.3.2 PROPHETIC LIBERTY

Where confessional binding does not apply but tolerance is to be exercised the concept ‘prophetic liberty’ is used (cf. e.g. 2.14.2.1.9). In this paragraph I wish to do no more than define the matter.⁸⁸⁷

‘Prophetic liberty’ refers to one’s freedom of conscience (‘liberty’), and the right to state one’s convictions (‘to prophesy’). ‘Prophetic liberty’ might otherwise be described as ‘freedom of interpretation and articulation’.

‘Prophetic liberty’ is not identical to ‘freedom of speech’. ‘Freedom of speech’ implies full substantive freedom and knows no substantive standard (the only standard generally used is ‘provided one does not injure another with one’s words’). ‘Prophetic liberty’ has as its substantive standard the Word of God.

In ecclesiastical circles, the concept of ‘prophetic liberty’ is especially applied to the fields of exegesis (biblical theology) and dogmatics (systematic theology). Within the context of exegesis, it implies that there need not be agreement on the exact meaning and scope of a particular Bible text. Thus it is within the bounds of prophetic liberty to argue that the phrase ‘in proportion to faith’ in Rom. 12:6 has an objective reference to the content of faith. Within the context of dogmatics, it implies that there need not be agreement on the precise understanding and formulation of a particular doctrine. *Theologoumena* thus form the body of doctrines falling within ‘prophetic liberty’. An illustration would be the supralapsarian and infralapsarian positions on the counsel of God.

Logically speaking, there would also be ‘prophetic liberty’ within the field of ethics. It would then refer to those matters on which difference of opinion exists: for example the observance of the Lord’s Day. However, the phrase ‘prophetic liberty’ is, to my knowledge, rarely if ever used in this context. This makes sense, since freedom in the field of ethics is not related to what one says (prophesying) but what one does, how one acts.

⁸⁸⁵ For a discussion with literature see Dunn, *Romans*, 727-728.

⁸⁸⁶ Constitution of the International Conference of Reformed Churches, article IV.1b (www.icrconline.com).

⁸⁸⁷ For further information on this matter see Schokking, *Leertucht* and Popma, *De vrijheid der exegeese*.

3.4.3.3 THE LINE BETWEEN BINDING AND TOLERANCE

Calvin spoke of fundamental and not-so-fundamental articles of faith.⁸⁸⁸ Throughout the debate on confessional subscription, all parties have acknowledged that there are matters taught by divine revelation that ought to be binding, and matters with respect to which there ought to be tolerance. This is true to Scripture. On the one hand, we read that ‘all that I have commanded you’ is to be ‘observed’ (Matt. 28:20), and ‘the whole counsel of God’ is to be ‘declared’ (Acts 20:27). On the other hand, we read, ‘one person esteems one day above the other, another esteems every day alike; let each fully be convinced in his own mind’ (Rom. 14:5). How does one draw the line between that to which one is bound and that with respect to which there should be tolerance?

In the Reformed tradition, the confessions are generally considered to mark this boundary (e.g. Kuyper, 2.9.2.6). The opening lines of the Athanasian Creed are considered the example to follow:

Whosoever will be saved: before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic Faith.
Which Faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled: without doubt he shall perish
everlastingly.⁸⁸⁹

How is the line between binding and tolerance to be drawn?

With a defining confession as outlined in 3.3.10, this would not be such a difficult matter, for the confessional documents of the church would initially have been drawn up for the purpose of denoting that line. The words of the Athanasian Creed could introduce such a confession. Of course, having a defining confession would not mean that there would be no discussion on this matter. The task of the church continually to conform its confessing to the standard of Scripture implies the certainty of constant discussion. However, there would be less uncertainty and tension in such discussions since structures are in place to deal with the matter.

The problem the Reformed face is that at this moment there are no such defining confessions. I have become convinced that the problem of drawing the line is primarily caused by the confessional documents the churches presently own. Ongoing reflection and research indicates that some materials contained in the confessions or aspects thereof belong within the sphere of tolerance. Further, the confessional heritage is on some points so detailed as to be unfathomable for many church members. Finally, the conviction is also growing that some materials not found in the confessions ought to be included. It is not without reason that men like Doedes, Van Toorenenbergen, Vonk, and Wiskerke criticized elements of the Reformed confessions.

A few examples are in order here.

1. *There is much debate as to the meaning of the line ‘He descended into Hell’ of the Apostles’ Creed. The explanation found in HC q&a 44 chooses a line that does not find everyone’s agreement, though in substance it is considered Scriptural.*
2. *The exposition on the sacraments in the Heidelberg Catechism is often considered too detailed.*
3. *The Canons of Dort are often considered to be too elaborate for ordinary church member (especially the sections Rejection of Errors).*
4. *Lacking in the ecumenical creeds and the Three Forms of Unity, and much debated today, are the doctrine of marriage, an explicit exposition on the doctrine of the covenant, and the issue of women in office.*

The problem of drawing the line between binding and tolerance has two sides to it, which seem to me to parallel the distinction between substantive law and formal law (cf. 3.1.4.1). Substantively, the question is: how is the distinction to be described? Formally, the question is: who sets and maintains the line? The former question will be dealt with here, and the latter in the subsections on the authority of binding (3.4.6) and what happens after subscription (3.4.8).

I have earlier distinguished between various layers of confessing (3.3.4.2.2). From the perspective of subscription, binding to the first layer is of more importance than binding to the second layer. I have noted that ideally the second layer of confessing will always be within the

⁸⁸⁸ See Calvin, *Institutes*, IV:i.12.

⁸⁸⁹ Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 2:66.

boundaries of the first layer. This does not mean, however, that a subscriber is limited in his confessing to that second layer. In practice, he must conform to the second layer, but in convictions and confessing he may move beyond that second layer, as long as he remains within the confines of the first layer.

For example, the Three Forms of Unity allow room for the doctrine of connectionalism, though the Church Order of Dort, at least in the Doleantie tradition, rejects it (cf. 3.1.1.3.4.2.2). On the doctrine of connectionalism, tolerance should therefore be exercised, though within the confines of Doleantie polity an office bearer will have to practise autonomism.

In practice, this approach is complicated by the fact that some materials that ought to be found in the first layer are only found in the second layer. This makes it much more difficult to determine where the line exactly lies.

For example, the Three Forms of Unity do not clearly state that only males may serve in a ruling office, while the church order and liturgical forms for ordination used in several orthodox Reformed churches do. For many Reformed, women in ruling office is a confessional and church divisive issue.

Ideally, the line between binding and tolerance thus lies between the first and second layers of confessing. In practice, because second layers of confessing may contain materials that belong in the first layer of confessing, the line has proved more difficult to draw.

However, even limiting oneself in binding to the confessions alone is not without its problems. Here too a measure of tolerance will be required, certainly given the current situation. I distinguish at least three perspectives from which a line between binding and tolerance may be drawn: exegesis, presentation, and doctrinal substance.

The exegetical line implies that while one may agree that a doctrine confessed is taught by Scripture, one is not bound to accept that all the texts adduced by the confession teach this doctrine. Theoretically it is possible for doctrine Alpha to be considered proven by texts A and B, and that subsequently minister X accepts text A but rejects B while minister Y rejects text A and accepts text B. The point is that both accept doctrine Alpha, considering it to be taught by Scripture.

By way of illustration, one need not hold that the plural first person pronoun in Gen. 1:26,27 and 3:22 (BC art. 9) is indicative of the Trinity, provided one holds the doctrine of the Trinity as something taught by Scripture.

The presentational line relates to the distinction between the substantive aspects and the formal aspects of the confession (cf. 3.3.4.3.1). Where a matter is clearly only formal (as is the case with most illustrations), there can be tolerance. Since formal and substantive elements in a confession cannot always be segregated, there can be formal aspects that do not fall within the set of that which is tolerable.

By way of illustration, one need not hold that the union of Christ's divine and human natures is comparable to that of the union of body and soul (Athanasian Creed art. 37).

However, it is questionable whether it is possible to defend the Reformed understanding of election without also holding a doctrine of reprobation (Canons of Dort).

Finally, a doctrinal line may be drawn. In a defining confession there would be no such line. Thesis statements and antithetical statements are, according to the conviction of the church, void of *theologoumena*, and stated in what the church considers to be their most simplistic form. However, existing confessions do not meet the criteria of a defining confession. They contain *theologoumena*. Moreover, in expositing doctrines, existing confessions may go into a degree of detail that extends beyond the indisputable. There ought to be tolerance with respect to *theologoumena* and aspects of doctrines that go beyond the indisputable.

By way of illustration, one need not hold that a person may not marry his or her deceased spouse's sibling (WCoF 24.4), or that the ten commandments divides into two tables according to the division indicated by Christ (HC q&a 93).

These three perspectives from which the line may be drawn certainly apply in the current situation, with confessions of mixed substance. They would also apply if one were to have a defining confession. For though one may strive to minimize the limitations that come with creatures articulating divine concept, and the restrictions that sin imposes, no confession will be

immaculate. For that reason, even if a defining confession were written in the format outlined in 3.3.10, these three perspectives will need to be kept in mind. In fact, applying them in given situations may assist the church further to refine its confessional heritage.

Finally, another factor affecting the position of the line between binding and tolerance relates to the person being bound. The decision of GS The Hague 1914 suggests that different standards apply for office bearers and non-office bearers. This issue will receive further attention in 3.4.5.

3.4.3.4 SITUATIONAL TOLERANCE

One may approach the matter of tolerance in a purist way. The truth of the matter, however, is that tolerance is always exercised in a certain context. Instead of taking a positivist or natural law approach to a question concerning tolerance, the interactionist approach is used. This means that certain things are tolerated under certain conditions while they would not be in other situations.

It also means that the question whether tolerance should be exercised with respect to a certain matter is only decided once an issue arises, usually by way of a doctrinal discipline case. It is quite difficult to demarcate the line between tolerance and binding in advance.

It is interesting to note that churches with roots in the GKN(v) tend to avoid trying to demarcate such a line, while Reformed and Presbyterian churches with other roots are less hesitant to do so. A clear example is the present debate on 'Federal Vision' in North America, where the Canadian Reformed Churches see no need to create a study committee on the issue, while the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Reformed Church in the United States, and the United Reformed Churches in North America do.

3.4.3.5 SUMMARY

In short, binding to the confessions of the church is a proper way of fulfilling the Scriptural injunction to hold fast the faith once for all delivered to the saints. However, there is also a measure of tolerance, generally referred to as prophetic liberty. The line between confessional binding and prophetic liberty is not easily drawn. Ideally, it lies between the first and second layers of confessing. However, because in practice the substantive and formal lines between these two layers do not coincide, pinpointing this line is a complicated matter. Within confessional documents, the line can be drawn from exegetical, presentational, and doctrinal perspectives. The extent to which the line is affected by the type of person to whom the binding applies will be looked at in 3.4.5. However, it must be said that it is difficult to draw the line between binding and tolerance in advance, and tolerance is often determined by the situation in which the question is posed.

3.4.4 THE INDIRECT OBJECT OF BINDING

To what ought one to be bound? There are those who claim that there ought to be no creed but Christ. Those who do have creeds practise their bond with those creeds in various ways.

In this subsection I will explore the indirect object of binding. I will begin with a brief overview of what has been officially regulated over the course of time in Dutch Reformed circles (3.4.4.1). Then I will look at the issue of binding to Scripture or binding to confessions (3.4.4.2). Next, I will present a systematization of various types of binding distilled from empirical study (3.4.4.3). Finally, I will comment on which confessions ought to be subscribed (3.4.4.4).

3.4.4.1 HISTORICAL DATA

The various regulations with respect to doctrinal supervision and the various forms of subscription that have been or are being used in Dutch Reformed circles are not in agreement on the indirect object of binding.

There is already disparity between CO-1619 and FS-1619. The former prescribed subscription to the Belgic Confession for ministers and professors, and subscription to the Belgic Confession or Heidelberg Catechism for catechizers. Via FS-1619, however, those subscribing subscribed the Three Forms of Unity, specified as 'all the articles and points of doctrine contained in [the Three Forms of Unity].' This description of the indirect object of subscribing is also found in FS-1905

(GKN), FS-1947 (CGKN), and FS-2001 (CGKN). Substantially identical are FS-1956 (GKN[s]) and FS-1978 (GKN(v)): these specify subscription to the Three Forms of Unity in everything or in all parts respectively. In various circles, the church order was changed to agree with the form of subscription. Thus CO-1905 (GKN), CO-1947 (CGKN), CO-1955 (GKN[s]), CO-1978 (GKN(v)), and AKS-2004 (NGK) all prescribe subscription to the Three Forms of Unity.

In the NHK, the indirect object of subscribing has been variously described. Via FS-1816, an office bearer subscribed ‘the doctrine conformably God’s Holy Word contained in the adopted forms of unity.’ FS-1854 spoke of ‘the spirit and main substance of doctrine contained in the adopted forms of unity.’ FS-1883 dropped the concept of ‘doctrine’, referring simply to ‘the interests of God’s Kingdom and in agreement herewith those of the NHK’, while FS-1888 made it ‘the principles and character of the Reformed Church in this country.’ CO-1951 (NHK) and CO-2004 (PKN) opted for the very loose description, ‘the confessing of the church’.

FS-1972 (GKN[s]) explicated more clearly what was meant by subscribing with respect to God’s Word and to the confessions. The indirect object of subscription is there presented as “the Holy Scripture as the Word of God ... as only rule for faith and life” and further as “the confessing of the church ... brought to expression in the three general confessional documents and the three forms of unity.” This ‘layering’ is also found in FS-1994 (NGK): “the Holy Scripture ... as the only rule for faith and life” and “the three general confession documents and the three Forms of Unity.” FS-1994 is interesting because it further describes the confessions in terms of their functioning (“faithful instruction and defence of the truth of Scripture, ... as testimony of our faith and guideline for our official ministry”) as opposed to simply accepting their existence.

3.4.4.2 BOUND TO SCRIPTURE OR TO THE CONFESSIONS?

I have already indicated that Christians are bound to hold fast the teachings of Scripture unchanged (3.2.5.1). Because confessions are the expression of the convictions of the church, which convictions are standardized by the doctrine of Scripture, being bound to the confession and being bound to Scripture should then be the same thing. However, confessions are the work of fallible men, and thus the confessions and Scripture can coincide, but need not. Within the scope of being bound, it is being bound to Scripture that has priority. Thus it is proper that when asked to profess their faith, church members are asked whether they profess that the doctrine of Scripture is the complete doctrine of salvation and are asked by way of a secondary clause to acknowledge that this doctrine of Scripture is found in the confessions and taught in ‘this Christian church’.

*It would be advisable to change the wording of this question, found in various Reformed liturgical forms. The present format is “Do you confess that the doctrine of the Old and New Testaments, summarized in [the confessions]⁸⁹⁰ and taught here in this Christian Church, is the complete doctrine of salvation?” There are those who fail to see that subject of the main clause is “the doctrine of the Old and New Testaments” (e.g. De Hoest *cum suis*, 2.6.2.7). The matter could be remedied by rephrasing the question as follows: “Do you confess that the doctrine of the Old and New Testament—as it has been summarized in the confessions and is taught here in this Christian Church—that this doctrine is the complete doctrine of salvation?”⁸⁹¹*

It will be clear that where there is tension between the binding to Scripture and the binding to the confessions the binding to Scripture has priority. Thus it is possible for church members to have objections to doctrines articulated in confessional documents considered and possibly acted upon

⁸⁹⁰ There are various versions of the phrase ‘the confessions’ such as ‘the Articles of the Christian faith’, ‘the Apostles’ Creed’ and ‘the confessions’. Strictly speaking they all refer to the same thing. However, there are those who argue otherwise. See Van Rongen, *Our Reformed Church Service Book*, 189-190.

⁸⁹¹ A recently adopted liturgical form for baptism in the GKN(v) phrases the question now as follows: “Do you confess that the whole Bible, the Old and New Testament, is the Word of God? Do you believe that the doctrine of the Bible, as it is summarized in the Apostles’ Creed and is proclaimed here in the Christian church, is the true and complete doctrine of salvation?” GKN(v), *Gereformeerde Kerkboek* (2), 723.

(cf. 3.4.8). In doing so, the church will always return to Scripture to consider the teachings found there and, if necessary, (re)formulate them in its confession.

3.4.4.2A EXCURSUS: BINDING TO THE CHURCH ORDER AND TO A CODE OF CONDUCT

In some Reformed circles it was or is customary to bind not only to the doctrine of the church, but also to the church order or a particular code of conduct. FS-1574 bound to the articles of Emden, and in 1610 the churches in Zeeland adopted two forms of subscription, one for binding to the confessions and one for binding to the church order. Binding to the church order was not included in FS-1619. The CGKN (re)introduced this binding into their form of subscription in 1966.

In view of the context of individualism in the twenty-first century—in general, people put their own desires before those of the community—explicit commitment to the church order and synodical decisions, as the CGKN has done, would seem wise.

Further, FS-1816 was considered superior to FS-1619 because among other things it included a statement with respect to the subscriber's walk of life (cf. 2.6.2.5). In the Reformed tradition, this is also part and parcel of the vows that are found in the liturgical forms for ordination.

On the one hand, one may argue that adding commitment to a code of conduct to the form of subscription is superfluous: the matter is adequately addressed in the ordination vows. On the other hand, a promise to such a commitment fits within the character of the form of subscription. Moreover, the ordination vow limits itself to one's general walk of life, and does not take into account one's professional activity. Given the need felt for professional codes of conduct for office bearers, an explicit commitment to a code of conduct (including mention of the call to official secrecy) would also seem wise.⁸⁹²

Although these issues are not pertinent to the subject of my study, it is proper to take these matters into consideration when reconsidering the concrete practice of subscription. When I come with proposals at a later stage, I will therefore include these issues as well.

3.4.4.3 TYPES OF BINDING OR SUBSCRIPTION

Confessional subscription is a hotly debated subject that has drawn the interest of all manner of writers in Dutch Reformed communities in every decade over the last two centuries. Because the discussions were mostly *ad hoc*, often initiated by a particular undertaking or phenomenon perceived to be a threat, there is hardly any system or order in the terminology of the discussion. I have considered it beneficial to develop a technical apparatus by which one might quickly define and designate a particular author's standpoint and allow diachronic comparison.

From studying the literature, it becomes clear that there are two factors involved in standpoints on confessional binding. These two factors are how one is bound to the substance of confessional writing and the agent that binds. The first factor will receive attention at this point, the second in a later part (3.4.6.2).

In what follows, I will first present a classification of my own making that categorizes the various positions that might be held. Next, I will review a number of positions on confessional subscription that have been variously interpreted in the past, explaining how I believe these should be understood. Finally, I will indicate what I believe to be the most appropriate type of binding.

3.4.4.3.1 Forms of Subscription Classified According to the Substance of Confessional Writings

When subscription is considered in terms of the contents or substance of a confessional writing, the question is asked what one is actually being bound to. From this perspective, I have identified six types of subscription in the literature I have read. I have designated these: literal, substantive, essential, system, differentiating complete, and attitudinal.

⁸⁹² The CGKN adopted such a code of conduct (*gedragscode*) for their ministers in 2001 (*Acta...CGKN...*, art. 226 and bijlage 104.2).

I refer to the strictest form of subscription as **literal subscription** (in Dutch: *letterlijke binding*). Those who defend literal subscription to confessions argue that a confessor is bound to all aspects of a confession: both substance and form, the latter even to the extent of phrasing and argumentation. Within this scheme, there is little distinction between Scripture and confession in authority, and occasionally those who hold this position will remark that the confessions also are inspired. Seventeenth century ultra-orthodox Lutherans were exponents of this position.⁸⁹³ Officially, there are no Dutch Reformed churches that defend this position, though tendencies in this direction do exist.

The historical review makes clear that many have been said to defend literal subscription, while close scrutiny of their stances reveals that this is not the case. The position of De Hoest cum suis (2.6.2.7) comes closest to defending this stance.

The position that is a little less strict I designate **substantive subscription** (in Dutch: *inhoudelijke binding*). Those defending a substantive subscription to confessions argue that a confessor is bound to the full substance of a confession rather than to its form. Typical exponents of this position are orthodox Reformed and Presbyterian churches.⁸⁹⁴ Within this view, authors often debate to what extent secondary issues should be considered part of the substance of a confession and whether a particular element of a confession belongs to its substance or form. Most Dutch Reformed churches officially enforce substantive subscription.

Yet a little less strict is the position that I refer to as **essential subscription** (in Dutch: *hoofdzakelijke binding*—literally, main substance subscription).⁸⁹⁵ Those defending essential subscription to confessions argue that a confessor is bound only to the essential points of a confession. These are usually referred to as the fundamental or central articles of faith.⁸⁹⁶ The difference between substantive subscription and essential subscription is that someone holding to substantive subscription will assume the confession in all its elements to be binding while someone holding to essential subscription will assume the confession in a select set of its elements to be binding. This approach to doctrinal subscription was in force in the NHK between 1816-1951. A troubling factor with this view is that there is no concrete list of what in the confessions is considered its essence or main substance.⁸⁹⁷

*Stepping for a moment outside the Dutch context, I next make mention of **system subscription** (in Dutch: *systeem binding*).⁸⁹⁸ The concept ‘system subscription’ seems to have its origin in the formulation of the second oath adopted by Presbyterians in America with respect to confessional subscription. In this ordination vow, one was asked to ‘sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.’⁸⁹⁹ In later discussions on confessional subscription this led to the concept of ‘system subscription’. According to an opponent of system subscription, within this standpoint subscribers are free to dispute any particular point of doctrine as long as it does not upset the system of doctrine as a whole.⁹⁰⁰ In practice, system subscription could be identical to either substantive subscription or essential subscription, it depends on how one defines and describes the system of doctrine. The difference with the Dutch Reformed approach to subscription is that not only is the substance itself is binding but so also is the way the substantive elements relate to each other.⁹⁰¹*

⁸⁹³ See Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 1:331-332.

⁸⁹⁴ Such as those which are members of the International Conference of Reformed Churches (www.icrconline.com).

⁸⁹⁵ The term ‘essential’ is used in the strict etymological sense of ‘with reference to essence’.

⁸⁹⁶ On the concept ‘fundamental’ see Van Hogendorp, *Adres aan de Synode*, 9-10 and Diermanse, *Fundamenteel*. On the concept ‘central’ see Volten, *Belijden*, 42.

⁸⁹⁷ This is clearly borne out by the first thesis posed by Diermanse in his dissertation: “One cannot speak of the fundamental articles of faith.”

⁸⁹⁸ The term is found in Hall, *Practice*.

⁸⁹⁹ Knight III, "Subscription to Westminster Standards", 199.

⁹⁰⁰ See the definition given by Smith, "Full Subscription", 186-187.

⁹⁰¹ ‘System subscription’ is contrasted with ‘full subscription’, which would compare with my literal or substantive binding. I suspect that the difference between the Dutch and American approach might lie in their respective

Another form of subscription is **differentiating complete subscription** (in Dutch: *differentiërende algehele binding*). In theory it is akin to substantive subscription but distinguishes itself from substantive subscription in that it weighs the various elements within a confession differently. The weight of a confessional point depends on its importance and centrality within divine revelation. Another factor in determining the weight of such a point is the context in which confession takes place. It distinguishes itself from essential subscription in that it does not consider the less important matters unimportant and therefore irrelevant and not binding. Differentiating complete subscription is not officially practised by a Dutch church but, as I intend to make clear in what follows, is a position at times held in the Reformed debate.

There is much similarity between this approach and system subscription. The difference is that within the context of system subscription there tends to be less attention for the individual points of the confession. Differentiating complete subscription might be considered the combination of system subscription and substantive subscription.

I have designated a final form of subscription **attitudinal subscription** (in Dutch: *houding binding*). I use this to designate a binding to confessions without binding to its substance. It suggests that one is merely to be inspired by the force or direction of a confession: the spirit and fervour with which confessors spoke, the underlying principles that motivated confession, the intentions that drove confessors. Within this scheme, the emphasis comes to lie on a confessional writing as the product of the activity of confessing, and one speaks not of being bound to the confessions (substantive) of the church but to the confessing (verbal) of the church. This form of subscription is found particularly with Barthians, the NHK since 1951, and the PKN.

3.4.4.3.2 Review of Various Types of Confessional Subscription

Having given the classification above, it is worthwhile to review a number of positions on confessional subscription outlined and attempt to classify them. I will concentrate on those positions that have been variously understood in the past. Most of the stances reviewed will relate to those presented in the historical part of this study.

3.4.4.3.2.1 The Position of the Seceders

Polman groups Moorrees c.s., De Hoest c.s., and the Seceders together. Because he does not distinguish the positions clearly, he implies that the Seceders also defended literal subscription.⁹⁰² There are clear indications, however, that this is not the case. In 1837, De Cock was willing to subscribe the Church Order of Utrecht, 1837, though he did not fully agree with its confessional statements on the nature of the church (2.5.2.15). This would not work within the context of literal subscription. The position defended by Van Velzen (2.8.2.12) may suggest that he felt inclined towards a position between substantive and literal subscription. However, I believe that Van Velzen realized that substance and form cannot be as easily distinguished as people often seem to think they can. Thus his comments that the way something is phrased is also of confessional relevance would fall within the bounds of substantive subscription and does not indicate an instance of literal subscription. The same may be said of Trimp (2.14.2.6).

3.4.4.3.2.2 The Position of I. da Costa

Da Costa's position on confessional subscription is not easy to catch in a single sentence. The problem is that in practice he refused to subscribe the Three Forms of Unity. This made his orthodoxy questionable in the eyes of Juridical Calvinists generally, though it would seem that one of their leaders, Groen van Prinsterer, did not have such doubts. De Hoest *cum suis* considered Da Costa's position on subscription akin to that of the Remonstrants, and Polman added to this the Groningers and Barthians.⁹⁰³ On the other hand, Da Costa himself clearly advocated a stance that

philosophical environments. I am thinking in particular of the influence of the Common Sense Philosophy in America and the various German philosophies (Kant and Hegel) in the Dutch Republic.

⁹⁰² Polman, *NGB*, 1:36-39.

⁹⁰³ Den Hoest, *Noodzaakelijke Aanwijzing*, 105-141 (esp. 107, 135); Polman, *NGB*, 1:20-23.

comes close to literal subscription: in a newly written confession he would consider even the proof texts binding. What many fail to see is that Da Costa argued from an idealist stance. Because this was not clear, injustice has been done to him during his lifetime and thereafter. Da Costa's stance is, in my opinion, a worthwhile corrective on the somewhat intellectualist approach taken by Juridical Calvinists and the traditionalist approach of the Traditional Calvinists.

3.4.4.3.2.3 The Position of G. Groen van Prinsterer

It was Groen van Prinsterer who, via the address of the Seven Gentlemen (2.6.2.3), coined the phrase 'broad-minded and unambiguous' ('*onbekrompen en ondubbelzinnig*'). The phrase itself has proved ambiguous, evidenced by the fact that it has been used to defend the positions of Van Toorenenbergen's ECPV (to which also the Ethical Gunning jr. belonged), the GKN(v), the NGK, and the SoW or PKN. During the course of his reflection on confessional subscription, Groen van Prinsterer always presented a somewhat vague figure between the Juridical Calvinists and the Medical Calvinists.⁹⁰⁴ Though he always felt more inclined towards the Juridical Calvinists, the question once posed by Barger "why speak continually of binding to *a* and not *the* confession"⁹⁰⁵ indicates that in his own time people were unsure how to understand Groen van Prinsterer's position in detail. What is one to make of Groen van Prinsterer's stance?

To begin with, the phrase 'broad-minded and unambiguous' is of little use if one does not have a list of doctrines to which one is to be bound and one looks at it in the scale of essential-substantial-literal subscription. It is interesting to note that the seven gentlemen did provide such a list. This basically followed the doctrines found in the Belgic Confession but omitted the doctrine of the sacraments.⁹⁰⁶ This omission makes clear that the seven gentlemen probably did not consider the confession as such to indicate what doctrines were substantive and ought to be binding. Does this mean the seven gentlemen, including Groen van Prinsterer, defended essential subscription?

The answer, I believe, is no. The problem is that this question arises from empirical observations and a too limited understanding of what types of binding exist. In trying to understand Groen van Prinsterer, I believe it is necessary to step beyond the scheme of literal-substantive-essential subscription, and cease trying to pin him down within this scheme.

It would seem that most people in the Dutch debates considered four positions: literal, substantive, essential, and formal (attitudinal) subscription. The mere existence of the American 'system subscription'—which does not fit into this scheme—makes clear that there are also other approaches.

Most of Groen's contemporaries (was Da Costa an exception?) saw confessions as a set of doctrines, the sum of its parts, and subscription as the question 'what part is binding?' Groen van Prinsterer, however, looked at the confessional heritage of the church as an organic whole, not unlike American Presbyterians who look at the confessional standards as containing 'the system of doctrine'. Within the context of 'organic whole', the phrase 'broad-minded and unambiguous' takes on a clear meaning. 'Broad-minded and unambiguous' implies 'not being obsessed with the details but endeavouring to maintain the whole.' Hence Groen van Prinsterer attempted to have the confessions adopted '*sans phrase*' at the Odeon meeting. And thus he tended to speak ideally of binding to *a* confession rather than *the* confession.

I suggest therefore that Groen van Prinsterer advocated what I previously have designated 'differentiating complete subscription'.⁹⁰⁷ His position was: bind to the whole confession and the confession as a whole, in each situation taking note of what is important.

3.4.4.3.2.4 The Position of the NHK taken in 1841 and 1842

⁹⁰⁴ See Kuiper, *Voormannen*, 94 and 190.

⁹⁰⁵ Letter 15-04-1865 (Groen van Prinsterer, *Briefwisseling*, 3:755).

⁹⁰⁶ The list can be found in Van Oene, *Patrimony Profile*, 91.

⁹⁰⁷ I therefore disagree with Van Rooden's conclusion that Groen was vague on purpose because he did not want to prescribe the character of the church (Van Rooden, *Religieuze Regimes*, 29). To my way of thinking, Groen wanted to prescribe the character of both the church and the fatherland.

In 1841, the NHK fixed its understanding of confessional subscription and upheld it in 1842, in spite of many protests, (2.6.2.5). This position is, properly speaking, a combined position of attitudinal and essential subscription. NHK members were to adhere to the spirit and nature of the confessions (attitudinal subscription) and, as far as the substance of the confessions were concerned, to the essence and main substance thereof (essential subscription).

3.4.4.3.2.5 The Position of the NHK after 1951 and 1961

In 1951, the NHK adopted a new church order but placed a ten-year moratorium on doctrinal discipline. In 1961, it became clear that the NHK was not going to exercise doctrinal discipline as juridical Calvinists among its membership thought it should be exercised (2.12.2.1). It is clear that GS 1961 of the NHK wanted the confession not to be an end in itself but an instrument towards appropriating the faith, a starting point from which to develop the faith, a procedure for a process rather than an appropriated product. This creates tension, for in the exercise of doctrinal discipline a confessional writing is the fixed standard by which one judges.

If the ideas expressed in the position paper published by the general synod are thought through to their logical end, especially the presumption that each era is spiritually unique, each time doctrinal discipline is exercised would in fact be a new moment of confessing and produce a new confessional writing. The lasting effect of a confession is the vigour with which it is expressed, not the substance it contains. The measuring gauge for whether doctrinal discipline should or should not be applied is no longer the substance of the issue but the vigour with which the matter is disputed, and how isolated the deviant teacher stands—and even then the church is warned with exclamation marks not to be frightened of novelties.

Thus, since 1961 the NHK has in fact practised attitudinal subscription. The PKN seems to be following the same route.⁹⁰⁸

3.4.4.3.3 Which is Appropriate?

The problem with literal-substantive-essential-attitudinal subscription is that it uses distinctions that cannot be made concrete. Literal binding goes too far but, especially in respect of existing confessional documents, the other three are no more than directions in which one might move. On this score, the proof of the pudding is always in the eating. The only way to make subscription truly work is to define what one is to be bound to. If the church were to hold a type of confession described in 3.3.10, I believe substantive subscription to the thetical and anti-thetical statements would be practicable. Subscription to the Scripture proof would be analogous to what American Presbyterianism refers to as system subscription.

However, as long as one works with existing confessional documents that are no longer fully in rapport with today's issues, and are not fully suited as material that can be subscribed (in regard to the substance of the confessions), differentiating complete subscription would be most appropriate.

The preference for differentiating complete subscription is thus pragmatically motivated. Those with an inclination towards legal positivism would prefer substantive subscription. However, it is wiser in the current circumstances to choose for a more interactionist approach. On paper, the two types of binding make no difference; the difference only becomes apparent when subscription is enforced (cf. 3.4.6.3.2).

3.4.4.3.4 Summary and Conclusion

In summary, there are two factors that determine the form of binding or subscription: the manner in which one subscribes a confessional writing, and the agent that binds. With respect to the former factor, I distinguish between literal subscription, substantive subscription, essential subscription, differentiating complete subscription, and attitudinal subscription (as well as system subscription, foreign to the Dutch scene). The latter factor will receive attention later on. I consider

⁹⁰⁸ As is evidenced by a recent case where a minister was tried for teaching reincarnation (case Rev. J. H. Veldhuizen in Classis Dordrecht, 2006)

substantive subscription to be the proper way to go if a defining confession of the type described in 3.3.10 existed; given the present situation, differentiating complete subscription is most appropriate.

3.4.4.4 WHICH CONFESSIONS?

In 1933, the CGKN was told by an advisory committee that subscription to Reformed confessions also implied subscription to Reformed Confessions other than those explicitly held in the CGKN (2.10.2.5). In 1994, the NGK adopted a form of subscription that not only referred to the Three Forms of Unity but also to the Ecumenical Creeds. The practical question thus requires attention: which confessions ought to be subscribed?

If the churches were to follow the route of drawing up new confessional material as outlined in 3.3.10, the question is quickly answered. Those serving the churches in an official capacity should subscribe the defining confession of the church, since it contains all the doctrines that the church considers necessary unto salvation and thus needing to be confessed and taught.

However, such a defining confession does not (yet) exist. It is then proper for the church to demand subscription to the existing body of confessional materials the church possesses. In view of the fact that the Belgic Confession explicitly states full acceptance of the Ecumenical Creeds in article 9, I do not think there is a substantive difference between forms of subscription that only speak of subscription to the Three Forms of Unity, and FS-1994 which also mentions the Ecumenical Creeds explicitly. However, for the sake of clarity, I think it is helpful to mention all six confessional documents.

There are three matters that need to be addressed as yet.

Firstly, not all confessional material properly belonging to the first layer is found in the confessional documents that the Dutch Reformed have. Some is found in the doctrinal sections of liturgical forms. It might be considered advisable therefore to add these doctrinal sections to the material that is to be subscribed.

Secondly, in some associations of Reformed churches, confessional material belonging to the first layer is found in doctrinal declarations issued by synods. For example, the various associations of *Gereformeerde Gemeenten* have doctrinal decisions that demarcate the boundaries of the church. Under their article 52 on subscription by ministers and professors, the CGKN list a number of doctrinal decisions that are considered to contain principles relating to the application of subscription. If this is required, it would make sense to include subscription to such statements in the form of subscription also. The GKN(v), however, do not have such statements, preferring to abide by what is found in the existing confessions.⁹⁰⁹

Finally, does subscription to the Three Forms of Unity imply subscription to all extant reformed confessions? In seeking an answer to this question, it is helpful to turn to the international scene. Within the context of the International Conference of Reformed Churches, member churches are required to “faithfully adhere to the Reformed Faith stated in the confessional documents listed in the Basis [the Three Forms of Unity and the Westminster Standards], and whose confessional standards agree with the said Reformed Faith”.⁹¹⁰ Like GS Emden 1571, which considered the Belgic Confession a ‘translation’ of the Gallican Confession, the various Reformed confessions are considered to be substantive equivalents of each other. Because subscription is saying something with respect to the substance of the confessional documents, one may indeed argue that subscription to one Reformed confession is subscription to all. However, this does raise all sorts of practical problems, for the confessional documents do not all cover the same ground or have the

⁹⁰⁹ CGKN, *Kerkorde CGKN*, art 52; *Acta...GKN(v)*... 2005: art. 25.1 grond 1.

⁹¹⁰ *Proceedings of the International Conference of Reformed Churches: Pretoria, 2005*, 238 (Constitution art. 4)—or see www.icrconline.com. I note that in 2009 this article may be expanded somewhat, so that also other confessions that are in agreement with the Three Forms of Unity and Westminster Standards are included.

same substance. In this context, it is especially useful to hold not to substantive or essential subscription but to differentiating complete subscription. A global effort to formulate a defining confession that includes all and only necessary substantive material from the set of Reformed confessions would solve this problem.

3.4.4.5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Since a confession is (in regard to its substance) derived from Scripture, in theory there is no distinction between binding to Scripture and binding to a confession. If there is tension between the two, the binding to Scripture has precedence.

By way of an empirical analysis, I have identified six ways in which a person may subscribe a confessional writing: literal subscription, substantive subscription, essential subscription, differentiating complete subscription, and attitudinal subscription, as well as system subscription.

All confessional material that the church possesses belonging to the first layer of confessing should be subscribed. This means that, besides subscribing the six creeds and confessions, the Dutch reformed should also regulate a manner of subscription to the doctrinal sections of liturgical forms and to doctrinal declarations issued by the broadest assemblies.

How might this be achieved?

First of all, I would plead for synchronization of church orders and forms of subscription. It is rather curious to see how often, even in the twenty-first century, church orders and forms of subscription do not always refer to the same material to be subscribed. Technically speaking, the NHK and PKN have a sensible approach: include the form of subscription in one's regulations, and do not make them appendices to a church order.

I now turn to the matter of what such a form of subscription should then state. Given the very present threat of confessionalism, I am very understanding of the approach taken by the GKN[s] and NGK to indicate the priority of God's Word as only rule for life and faith. Scripture is the absolute authority. However, to introduce this explicitly as a separate item into the form of subscription is to misunderstand the purpose of this form. The confessions being subscribed are very clear on the priority of Scripture. Could it be that those who wish to introduce a statement concerning the priority of Scripture into the form of subscription not only misunderstand the functioning of the form, but also are not too well acquainted with the confessions they are subscribing? I would consider a description of God's Word as "the only rule for life and faith" in a secondary sentence appropriate, but not as a separate item in the form of subscription.

Reformed churches prior to GS Dordrecht 1618-19, the CGKN, and also many Presbyterian churches, include subscription to the Church Order and other regulations in their form of subscription. In this way, one not only prescribes the abstract principles of doctrine but also their being put into practice. A formulation could be adopted that mirrors the description given in CO-1619 art. 31 with respect to the binding character of decisions taken by ecclesiastical assemblies. Because rules and agreements for the practical side to ecclesiastical life and fellowship are more susceptible to change than confessional documents, this element needs to be reflected in the binding. On that score, FS-2001 of the CGKN could be improved.

The phrase "all the articles and points of doctrine ... in everything" as found in FS-1619 and in various forms in later forms of subscription has caused much trouble. I suggest that it would indeed be appropriate to indicate in the form of subscription that there are layers in the confessions themselves. I have already indicated a preference for differentiating complete subscription.

Historically, the phrase '*onbekrompen en ondubbelzinnig*' refers to this form of binding. However, given the way in which this phrase has functioned in the past, I believe it has outlived its usefulness. To reflect the element 'complete', the phrase 'in their substance fully' could be used.

The element 'differentiating' is to be reflected in a re-wording of how a subscriber acts in view of the confessions by outlining not only the *process* but also the *goal* of such labour. This goal could be described in terms of the classic description of the attributes of the church found in the

Nicene Creed. Discussions in the NHK and GKN[s] have indicated that it would be appropriate to make room also for a reference to the intentions with which one labours (cf. 3.4.8.2).

This might be articulated as follows:

We, the undersigned, [task: ministers/professors in theology] in the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, acknowledge the Ecumenical Creeds and the Three Forms of Unity as well as the doctrinal sections of the liturgical forms of the said GKN to be in their substance fully in agreement with God's Holy Word, the only rule for life and faith. We hold that these confessions and documents serve adequately for the instruction in and defence of that Word. We consider them a testimony of our faith and they will serve as a guideline for our official ministry.

We promise therefore diligently to promote and faithfully to defend the doctrine confessed by the church without ever intentionally deviating from its substance and always in an endeavour to further the unity, sanctity, catholicity, and apostolicity of the church.

We, the undersigned, [task: ministers/professors in theology] in the [name of the association of churches], acknowledge the Confessional Standard of the [name of the association of churches] to be in its substance fully in agreement with God's Holy Word, the only rule for life and faith. We hold that this standard and those derived from it serve adequately for the instruction in and defence of that Word. We consider it a testimony of our faith and it will serve as a guideline for our official ministry.

We promise therefore diligently to promote and faithfully to defend the doctrine confessed by the church without ever intentionally deviating from its substance and always in an endeavour to further the unity, sanctity, catholicity, and apostolicity of the church.

(The left column contains the text that might be implemented in the current context, the right column contains the text that would function in my preferred context, taking into account factors that have already been or are yet to be discussed.)

3.4.5 THE DIRECT OBJECT OF BINDING

In 3.4.3, I quoted the Athanasian Creed as an example of how a creed or confession is considered to indicate what must necessarily be believed. It is interesting to note that in the conclusion to the Canons of Dort, it is not those who *believe* or *hold* the Remonstrant teachings who are condemned but only those who *teach* them. One reads:

Moreover, the Synod warns calumniators themselves to consider the terrible judgment of God which awaits them, for bearing false witness against the confessions of so many Churches; for distressing the consciences of the weak; and for laboring to render suspect the society of the truly faithful.⁹¹¹

Is there a difference between the ordinary church member and the office bearer when it comes to confessional subscription? In view of the fact that only office bearers are required to subscribe the confessions via a form of subscription, this would seem to be so. This will receive attention now.

I will begin with a brief overview of what has been officially regulated over the course of time in Dutch Reformed circles (3.4.5.1). In what then follows, I will consider the binding of church members (3.4.5.2) and the binding of office bearers (3.4.5.3).

3.4.5.1 HISTORICAL DATA

CO-1619 prescribed subscription for ministers and professors (the latter both theological and secular) as well as for schoolmasters. In its 175th session, GS Dordrecht 1619 extended

⁹¹¹ Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:596.

subscription also to those who serve as visitors of the sick (pastoral workers), and left it optional with respect to elders. Over the course of time, subscription was prescribed for ministers, elders and deacons, and is also practised for theological professors, proponents, and church labourers,⁹¹² though not always explicitly prescribed by the church order. During the nineteenth century, the NHK prescribed subscription only for proponents.

Subscription via public profession of faith was already regulated by Synod Dordrecht 1574.⁹¹³

3.4.5.2 THE BINDING OF CHURCH MEMBERS

The New Testament implies that all church members are required to believe (e.g. Matt. 28:19; Col. 1:23). This faith is brought to expression in confessional documents by churches. Church members are considered to express agreement with the faith convictions of the church by the very fact that they are members of a particular church (cf. 3.3.2).

However, there are two issues that need special attention. First of all, not all members can consciously express such agreement with the faith convictions of the church. In Dutch Reformed circles, a distinction is made between communicant and non-communicant members (these are in The Netherlands referred to as “confessing members” and “baptismal members”). Secondly, to what extent should members express agreement with the confessions? One might rephrase the latter issue as: is there a minimum to which one ought to be bound?

An interesting difference between the GKN(v) and the Canadian Reformed Churches is that the former refer at profession of faith to the doctrine of Scripture ‘summarized in the Apostles’ Creed’ while the latter refer to the doctrine of Scripture ‘summarized in the Reformed confessions’. The change was made in Canada because it was felt that limiting the reference to the Apostles’ Creed could be understood to imply a minimal confession. This issue also played a role in the debates of the 1960s within the GKN(v).

To answer these questions, one will first have to be clear what professing one’s faith actually implies.

Originally, church membership implied explicit agreement with the confessing of the church (CO-1619 art. 60).⁹¹⁴ This was the position maintained by Juridical Calvinists, and churches that accordingly have their roots in the Secession and Doleantie. However, especially since the 1860s, this became a debated point in the NHK. Some understood ‘admission’ as no more than a profession of a faith that could, somehow, be qualified as ‘Christian’. This is, with some minor changes, the official position of the PKN today.⁹¹⁵ During the twentieth century, Van Ruler took a moderating position, arguing that professing one’s faith is a promise to attempt to conform one’s faith to that of the church (2.11.2.5).

History seems to indicate that the higher one’s view of Scripture as divine revelation, the more precisely defined one’s understanding of profession of faith is. Further, those who emphasize *fides qua* at the expense of *fides quae* tend to defend more room for plurality within the church, and thus a looser bond to the confession. I have indicated that, while confessional substance should indeed not be considered equal in authority to Scripture, it should never be forgotten that this substance is considered to articulate a faith directly based on Scripture. Further, one cannot play *fides qua* and *fides quae* off against each other. Full church membership implies understanding what the church is about, what it teaches and practises. One may phrase it as Paul does: confessional membership implies discerning the body of Christ (1 Cor. 11:29).

⁹¹² On church labourers see *Acta...GKN(v)... 2005*: art. 36.3.3.

⁹¹³ See Bremmer, *Uit de Geboortegeschiedenis*, 41-42.

⁹¹⁴ This is also evidenced by the Form for Infant Baptism, that dates in its Dutch form to 1566. It is important to realize that this form functioned in a time when illiteracy was common.

⁹¹⁵ The position within the NHK was that the ‘profession’ “moves within article X of the Church Order” (Van den Heuvel, *De Hervormde KO*, 263-266). The PKN Church Order does speak of an examination of the substance of faith but nowhere specifies of what sort this faith should be (Van den Heuvel, *Toelichting Kerkorde PKN*, 219-222; see PKN, *KO en ordinanties 9-III* (114-116)).

At this point we can turn to the two issues. Firstly, is the distinction ‘confessing member’ and ‘non-confessing’ member justified? Within the Calvinist tradition, children of believers are considered members of Christ’s church (HC q&a 74). However, although infants can be said to profess their faith (Psalm 8:2), they are not physically able to express agreement with the confession of the church where God had given them birth. The distinction confessing/non-confessing member is thus justified. However, this does imply that those who are of a ‘confessionable’ age have a responsibility to confess their faith. In the GKN(v), the practice is that those who have not confessed their faith by the time they turn twenty-five, and cannot justify their not doing so, and are judged to be acting out of unbelief, are subject to excommunication.⁹¹⁶ When it comes to non-confessing members of the church, I can agree with Van Ruler: their church membership implies an endeavour to conform their faith to the faith of the church (2.11.2.5).

However, I cannot entirely agree with Van Ruler that this also applies to those who have publicly professed their faith. For the act of professing one’s faith is an expression of agreement with “the doctrine of [Scripture] ... taught here in *this Christian Church*.” In principle, one expresses agreement. This is not to say, however, that one must understand the full implications of all the substance of the Church’s confessing before one can profess one’s faith, as H. J. Schilder seems to have suggested (2.14.2.1.5). It implies that to the extent of the confessor’s ability, he is in agreement with this substance, and with respect to the rest will move in the line of the confessing of the church. At the same time, the recognition that church members are not capable of fully understanding the substance of the confessions may be seen as proof that the substance of the church’s confessing needs to be simplified and reduced.

The Church Order of Utrecht, 1837, stated in its second article that “the confession of faith”⁹¹⁷ consists of the admission of the heart, made public by an acknowledgement with the mouth, to all the main parts of the Christian religion” (cf. 2.5.2.15). Here too, one sees that confessional membership was not considered to be a binding to the confessions in all its details. However, I do wonder whether this phrasing would have worked in practice. For the phrase “all the main parts of the Christian religion” is undefined. It in fact suggests an essential subscription for confessing church members.

Should disparity between the faith of the confessor and the confessing of the church be discovered at a later point in time, it should then depend on the attitude and conduct of the confessor (cf. 3.4.8.4) whether the bond with the church’s confessing is at risk. In line with GS Dordrecht 1618-19 and GS Den Haag 1914 of the GKN (2.10.2.2.3), the criterion is not so much what a person believes as whether he or she propagates an erring faith conviction, or is teachable with respect to it.⁹¹⁸ Answer 85 of the Heidelberg Catechism considers those who “*show themselves to be unchristian in doctrine or life*” to be worthy of reprimand and discipline [emphasis RCJ].

3.4.5.3 THE BINDING OF OFFICE BEARERS

In Reformed circles, the practice exists of binding office bearers in particular to the confessing of the church. I have already noted that the aim of this binding is, traditionally, not a declaration of faith but an acknowledgement of the faithfulness of the church’s confessing to the doctrine of Scripture and a promise to teach this doctrine. This binding is in particular with a view to the unity, catholicity, sanctity and apostolicity of the church.

From a Scriptural perspective, such binding is justified. Both elders (teaching and ruling) and deacons are required to be well informed and capable of teaching (1 Tim. 3:2b, 9; Titus 1:9).

⁹¹⁶ *Acta...GKN...* 1939-43: art. 336. Van Oene argues one must have made profession by the age of twenty (Van Oene, *With Common Consent*, 279).

⁹¹⁷ Note that ‘confession of faith’ is here limited to ‘dogmatics’; the sentence continues with ‘the walk of life consists in...’, referring to ‘ethics’.

⁹¹⁸ See *Acta...GKN...* 1920: art. 25. In the Dutch tradition church membership and admittance to the Lord’s Table mean the same thing.

Furthermore, the office bearers in the church, in particular the elders, are responsible for the confessing of the church: they are the ones who have the right and duty to articulate it, and they are called upon to promote and defend it. Finally, the office bearers are to be exemplary towards the church members in convictions and lifestyle. It is therefore proper that office bearers are required to embrace all the substance of the confessing of the church.

The question arises whether subscription by elders and deacons should be enforced in the same way it is for ministers. In view of 1 Tim. 5:17, do ‘ruling’ elders have the same responsibility as ‘teaching’ elders?⁹¹⁹ What of deacons, who are called to give form to the ministry of mercy in the church? There should be room within confessional binding for the various tasks that those who are required to subscribe fulfil

The question is also legitimate whether binding should not be enforced for more than just the office bearers. After all, the teaching of the church is not limited to just its office bearers. In the Dutch tradition, it is quite common for confessing church members who are not office bearers to catechize non-confessing members. Originally, subscription was prescribed only for those with a teaching function in the church, the ministers and catechizers (or school masters). In line with this, all those who hold a higher teaching position in the church (e.g. at seminaries) are required to subscribe the Three Forms of Unity, whether they are office bearers in the church or not. I believe that subscription at a congregational level for those holding a teaching position should be encouraged. If one is convinced that subscription is proper for all who serve in some official capacity in the church, and not just for those who teach, subscription should be prescribed for all as well.

GS Amersfoort 2005 of the GKN(v) decided that church labourers should also subscribe the doctrine of the church, giving the following ground:

“Just as office bearers, church labourers ought to be trustworthy people with respect to their binding to the doctrine of Scripture. For office bearers this binding has been church politically fixed in the church order (arts. 52-53). Analogous to this, the adopted regulation stipulates the same binding.”⁹²⁰

Finally, if subscribers are required to embrace all the substance of the confessing of the church—FS-1619 speaks here of “all the articles and points of doctrine”—does this mean that they must also comprehend it all prior to serving in office? The fact that objections to the substance of the confessions can be submitted and judged by the churches would suggest that the answer must be ‘no’. As with confessing church members, so too can subscribers act in good faith.

This raises the questions where the boundary between appropriation by an office bearer and a church member might lie, and whether there are also distinctions between those serving in various official capacities. A common response has been that church members must minimally accept the Creeds and office bearers the confessions. [Borneman] was of the opinion that, in any case, the Canons of Dort were only for the teachers in the church (2.5.2.3). Those with a special teaching position—such as professors responsible for theological training—have been asked to subscribe more than the confessional material of the church (as happened in Kampen during the 1850s, cf. 2.7.2.12.3). Doedes even suggested that subscription applies only to the office bearers in the church (2.8.2.10). The history of the Dutch tradition indicates that there is a border somewhere, but where it lies exactly has never been determined.

I concur with Muurling that Doedes’ position is rather strange. Doedes’ analogy with the role which public servants (e.g. judges, cabinet ministers) play is, I believe, not right. It is true that such public servants are to act in keeping with the law, and are at the same time entitled to private opinions not in line with that law. This, however, cannot be the case with office bearers of the church. For such office bearers are also members of the church, and thus hold the faith convictions of the church.

⁹¹⁹ Bouma reflects on this in his commentary on Titus 1:9. He argues that even those who do not have the task to teach (1 Tim. 5:17 makes clear not all do), they ought to be able to teach. Bouma, *Timoteus en Titus*, 388-389.

⁹²⁰ *Acta...GKN(v)... 2005: art. 36.3 grond 3.*

The Dutch Reformed would do well to consider this matter more carefully. I have become convinced that a more thorough doctrinal training of office bearers, certainly ruling elders, would be proper. Why is it that candidates for the ministry are subjected to thorough ecclesiastical exams while elders are not?⁹²¹ As far as drawing the line within the confessional substance goes, office bearers should comprehend the first layer of the church's confessing and stand fully behind its substance. Office bearers are not necessarily required to understand backgrounds to confessional substances fully or to be able to argue them in deepest detail. This is the task of ministers or teaching elders, and they receive an academic training to this end. As such, it would be proper to distinguish between the binding of elders and deacons on one hand and ministers on the other. In a similar way, there would also be a difference between the subscription by ministers and by those appointed to train candidates for the ministry. In the same way, one may also argue for a difference between those serving as office bearers and those serving in other ministries (referred to as church labourers). The distinctions in binding cannot be quantified in terms of confessional substance but are of a qualitative character. This qualitative character comes into play, not in the phrasing of the form of subscription, but in the way in which deviance from one's subscription is dealt with.

The tradition common in Presbyterian circles to examine also ruling elders does not exist in Dutch Reformed circles. In fact, any male confessing member in good standing may serve as either elder or deacon. There are certainly all kinds of ways in which office bearers can qualify themselves further for their work. However, this all tends to be of a voluntary nature. Only with respect to ministers (teaching elders) do the Dutch Reformed traditionally have specific criteria. Within the GKN(v) the requirement at present is academically a Master in Theology and a period of internship.

With respect to indicating the difference between office bearers and confessing church members the discussions between the NGK and GKN(v) are instructive (2.14.2.1.10). I believe the NGK approach, in many ways very similar to that of the Apologists in the nineteenth century, reflects an improper contractarian influence. The church seems to be considered an association with various levels of participation requiring different measures of loyalty. On the other hand, I also believe the GKN(v) approach has gone too far, certainly as it has been articulated by H. J. Schilder (2.14.2.1.5). Schilder illustrates his stance by referring to the process of emigration. In response I point out that, in order to become acquainted with the language of the new country one does not just rote learn the dictionary but participates in society. His equation of the Canons of Dort with the Apostles' Creed as confessional documents is, I believe, a-historical and therefore improper. This approach (earlier already defended by Praamsma) leads to intellectual perfectionism becoming a mark of the true Christian. This has been one of the concerns of the NGK with the GKN(v). The GKN(v) in The Netherlands have (had) a tendency towards intellectualism; confessionalism is then but a small step away.

3.4.5.4 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In short, church members are bound to the substance of the church's confessing to the extent that they are able to comprehend it. Such binding implies that their faith convictions are identical to those of the church. Office bearers are to be bound to the substance of the church's confessing also to the extent that they are able to comprehend it. Their binding is more detailed in relation to the task they have within the church. Because they are the officials in the church, it is appropriate that they be bound more explicitly to the confessing of the church. It is proper also to distinguish between the binding of different office bearers since their tasks are different. It would be appropriate to extend subscription also to those who do not hold an office in the church but do fulfil a task in which the substance of the confessions plays an important role. One may think for example of catechizers and other church labourers.

⁹²¹ When discussing this once with people with a Presbyterian background I discovered that the Dutch tend to have a more thorough doctrinal examination of candidates for communicant membership than Presbyterians, one of the reasons why the average age for those taking communion for the first time in Dutch Reformed churches is much higher than in Presbyterian churches.

In view of social-psychological considerations, it would seem to be appropriate to reflect on the matter of 'compliance' and 'appropriation' in the context of confessional subscription (cf. 3.1.3).

In view of the foregoing, I believe that forms of subscription should not refer to the 'teaching' of the church's doctrine but to the 'promoting' of the church's doctrine. Hence I would suggest the following wording in the form of subscription, applicable for all sorts of subscribers:

*We promise therefore diligently to promote and faithfully to defend the doctrine confessed by the church without ever intentionally deviating from its substance and always in an endeavour to further the unity, sanctity, catholicity, and apostolicity of the church, **all this in keeping with our office or calling.***

Further, the matter of doctrinal binding for the various parties should be outlined in the church order. This might be done as follows, building on the text in 3.4.2:

B. Binding to the confessing of the church

Members of the church are to express their agreement with the doctrine confessed and taught by the church at their admission by means of

Those serving in one of the following ministries in the local church—minister, elder, deacon, church labourer—are to express their agreement with the doctrine confessed and taught by the church and promise to labour in keeping with this confessing at their ordination by means of ...

Those serving in one of the following ministries also beyond the local church—minister, professor in theology—are to express their agreement with the doctrine confessed and taught by the church and promise to labour in keeping with this confessing at their ordination by means of ...

3.4.6 AUTHORITY ASSOCIATED WITH BINDING

In section 3.3.8, attention was paid to the authority of confessions. There the conclusion was drawn that as expressions of faith considered to be founded on Scripture, confessions bear authority. However, this authority is not absolute. For confessions articulate the faith of the confessor, the church. I also indicated that one might distinguish various degrees of authority within the substance of confessions.

When I now pay attention to the authority associated with binding, attention focuses on the relationship between the church member, in particular those called upon to subscribe the confessions physically, and the confessions themselves. First, I will draw together some lines from the historical overview (3.4.6.1). Then I will look at the character of subscriptional authority (3.4.6.2). Next, I will consider how this authority is to be practised (3.4.6.3).

3.4.6.1 HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The propriety of confessional binding and subscription via a form has been hotly debated over time. Contractarian notions especially play a role in this debate. Often it is argued that joining the church is a voluntary act. The church, as a community of people, is free to determine how one might become a member, and what the rights, privileges and duties of membership are (e.g. Apologists, 2.8.2.10). Others take a different approach. Some take their starting point in the doctrine of the church, especially its unity and catholicity (e.g. Ethicals, 2.8.2.11). Others view the church only horizontally, understanding it to be the set of all who believe (e.g. Modernists, 2.8.2.10). In both approaches, the contractarian and the ecclesiological, it is noted that confessional subscription causes the church to disintegrate, and it is therefore argued that the practice should either be loosened or done away with altogether.

My impression is that this is a classic example of legal positivist, natural law, and interactionist approaches to the issue. The legal positivist sees the confession as a positioned constitution and subscription as a positioned practice. The natural law advocate takes his starting point in higher principles, such as the unity of the church. The interactionist is concerned with practice and goals, and sees subscription as detrimental to the church.

During the twentieth century, this element in the debate retreated into the background. It would seem to me that the tendencies towards individualization and democratization play a important role here, in the second half of the century leading to de-churching.⁹²² Contractarian notions justified having membership criteria, and as church membership was no longer a social requirement, those who had problems with confessional membership left the church, and thus also the debate. It has meant that the debate now takes place on the square inch, rather than the square mile.

3.4.6.2 ELEMENTS TO SUBSCRIPTIONAL AUTHORITY

Empirical analysis indicates at least three elements in subscriptional authority. Confessional subscription is authoritative because of Scripture, because of the church, and because of the person being bound; these three matters will first receive attention (3.4.6.2.1-3). I will then reflect on how the various elements work together (3.4.6.2.4). Finally, I will look at the *quia-quippe-quatenus* debate, a debate strictly speaking on the authority of confessional subscription, but in practice a debate on the authority of confessions themselves (3.4.6.2.5).

3.4.6.2.1 Authority on Account of Scripture

The substance of the confessions—articulating the common faith of the church—is ultimately drawn from the substance of Scripture. The authority of confessions is thus linked to that of Scripture (3.3.8).

When the church chooses to bind its members to its confessing, in particular those serving in an official ministry, the church gives form to this authority of confessions. In judicial terms, confessional subscription is the formal side to enforcing the authority that confessions derive from being linked to Scripture.

A person who uprightly owns the confession, therewith submits to the authority of Scripture. A person who questions the confession on a particular point has the right to appeal to Scripture to adjudicate in the matter.

3.4.6.2.2 Authority on Account of the Church

Confessions that are drawn up by the church or adopted by the church have ecclesiastical authority. They are considered authoritative because the assembly of believers has agreed that the confessional writings articulate their common faith. In an orthodox reformed context, it also means that these believers as the church consider the articulated beliefs to be fully in line with Scripture. It is by means of subscription that this authority is exercised.

In view of debates between the NGK and GKN(v), it should be noted that the ‘church’ here is not the local congregation but the catholic church.

The authority of subscription on account of the church has aspects that remind one of the social contract. I refer to this as the horizontal element. It is by agreement that the confession is considered authoritative. However, more needs to be said, for there is also a vertical element. As the body of Christ, the church bears divine authority in its speaking (cf. Acts 15:28). This is not to say that the church is inspired and can consider its speaking equivalent to that of Scripture. However, the ecclesiastical authority of the church is more than just the product of agreement. One might more appropriately describe it as the product of assent, assent to the articulated doctrine of the church founded on divine revelation. One might also phrase it as the official⁹²³ speaking of the church.

The fact that the authority of a confession is ecclesiastical has consequences for the use of the phrase ‘Scripture and confessions’. Previously, I have already indicated that the phrase is not

⁹²² The Dutch do not speak so much of dechristianization but of ‘*ontkerkelijking*’, de-churching. By this they mean that individuals no longer consider themselves member of a particular church. For many Dutch people today, being a Christian need not imply church membership.

⁹²³ ‘Official’ in the sense ‘related to the special offices in the church’. The Dutch term here would be ‘*ambtelijk*’.

without problems (3.3.8.1). Having now characterized the authority of the confessions as ecclesiastical, this can be further explained. When a doctrine is claimed to be in keeping with ‘Scripture and confession’, a double claim is made. First of all, the claim is made that the doctrine is taught in Scripture: it belongs to the body of divine doctrine. Secondly, the claim is made that the doctrine is taught in the church: it belongs to the body of ecclesiastical doctrine. The first is a claim to truth. The second is a claim to the functioning of this truth in the church: it is believed and confessed. One cannot prove the truth-value of an assertion with a cross-reference to the confession (except, maybe, within the confines of the church holding the confession). One cannot prove that the church teaches something with a cross-reference to Scripture.

By way of illustration, I believe a sentence such as ‘Jesus is the Son of God (Matt. 17:5; John 1:14, 18; John 3:16; Rom. 1:4; Gal. 4:4; BC art. 10; LD 13)’ is misleading. It would be better to insert between the Scripture references and the confessional references a word such as ‘compare’ (‘cf.’). At critical moments the subtle distinction between cross-references to Scripture and to confessions can have serious consequences. For example, one cannot prove the place of the descent into hell in the chronology of Jesus’ suffering by appealing to the Apostles’ Creed.

It is interesting to note that the Walcheren Articles cross-reference the Three Forms of Unity, while the Canons of Dort only reference the confessions generally in their conclusion. In view of the foregoing, one might conclude that the Walcheren Articles set out to explain what the church teaches (ought to teach?), while the Canons of Dort seek to outline what Scripture teaches.

3.4.6.2.3 Authority on Account of the Person Being Bound

A person believes and confesses his faith. Faith is personal, and thus the confession is personal. Because the Scriptural imperative is that this faith be constant and unwavering (Col. 1:23), a person’s confession will in turn be binding for his faith. It is in identifying the confessing of the church as the expression of one’s personal faith convictions that the authority of being bound to the confessing of the church becomes explicit. From this perspective, a person grants formal authority to a confessed article of faith. He accepts the fact that he is bound to the confession by concurring that the confession expresses his confession.

From a judicial perspective, a person is free to make this choice or reject it. Confessional binding is only a fact when one has professed one’s faith. Confessional subscription, with all the various elements involved, is only a fact when one has signed the form of subscription. In practice, contractarian notions play a role here.

Finally, it should be noted that this personal element works along two lines. Substantively, one binds oneself to the confession because one bows before the authority of divine revelation. Formally, one binds oneself to the confession because one is united with the community of confessing believers.

These two lines are not unlike the ‘natural’ and ‘spiritual’ lines of argument I identified in publications dating to the first half of the nineteenth century (e.g. 2.5.2.3,4,7,9,10; 2.6.2.3; 2.7.2.2).

3.4.6.2.4 Summary and Evaluation

A person’s faith is shaped by divine revelation. He is bound to his personal confession because, substantively, it reflects divine revelation. Being bound to a confession further rests on the fact that *the church* holds the confession. Horizontally, the contractarian argument may be applied—there is a common agreement to hold it. Vertically, the indwelling of the Spirit in the church is to be noted—the Spirit leads the church in Christ’s ways. Finally, confessional subscription depends on the personal consent to be bound to the confessing of the church. In short, the authority of subscribing to a confession has three elements to it: it is on account of Scripture as its source, on account of the church as its author, and on account of one’s personal choice and commitment (one might say one’s conscience) as its agent.

In debates on confessional subscription, attempts have been made to separate the ecclesiastical and personal elements from each other. Groningers focused on the conscience at the expense of the church, and Apologists focused on the church at the expense of the personal conscience. It would seem that they held their positions for negative reasons. Groningers considered it unjustifiable to

teach something one does not believe. Apologists considered it unnecessary to believe what one teaches.

I believe both lines of reasoning fail in that they do not carefully discern the nature of the human link that lies between divine doctrine and church doctrine. The point is, confessional church membership implies personally appropriating the confession of the church. Thus one cannot drive a wedge between the confessing of church members and the confessing of the church. The confessing of a church member will include the confessing of the church. It may be more, but it will not be consciously less. This implies that the church's confession is binding for the individual church member by way of its being ecclesiastical.

I use the phrase 'consciously less' on purpose. It is possible for a confessing member to be unaware of a portion of the church's confessing or the implications of the church's confessing. This is not on account of conscientious objection, but on account of lack of knowledge, a matter justified if the person is incapable of grasping the material, be it on account of age or disability.

It would serve the functioning of confessions well if this difference in authority was explicitly recognized. Within the Reformed tradition, one might so recognize it as analogous to differentiating between the authority of Scripture and the authority of the Church Order. These two are also different. CO-1619 art. 31 regulates that decisions are binding unless they are found to be at odds with Scripture or the Church Order. A decision that departs from Scripture is substantially unjustified, and a decision that departs (only) from the Church Order is formally unjustified. The former relates to the conscience of the believer, the latter to the form given to practise the communion of saints.

It is interesting to note that CO-1619 art. 31 does not reference objections to the confessions Analogous to this, a confession can be considered binding with respect to the conscience because it articulates God's Word and one's personal faith, while a confession is binding with respect to the church because one is a member of the church and has appropriated the confession.

Reflection on confessional subscription often makes use of BC art. 7. At times the article is used to undermine having confessions (cf. 2.5.2.5). However, the scope of this article does not cover what it is then implied to cover. The point in the article is that human documents will never equal the authority of divine Scripture and God's truth. The article does not state that, within the confines of divine Scripture and God's truth, human documents are to be rejected as binding.

3.4.6.1.5 *Quia—Quippe—Quatenus*

In Dutch reflection on confessional subscription, one frequently encounters the Latin terms '*quia*' and '*quatenus*' (cf. 2.4.5.6). These terms refer to a debate that raged particularly during the first half of the nineteenth century. This debate centred around the word '*overeenkomstig*' in the following sentence from FS-1816:

dat wij de leer, welke, overeenkomstig Gods Heilig Woord, in de aangenomen formulieren van eenigheid der Nederlandsche Hervormde Kerk is vervat, ter goeder trouw aannemen en hartelijk geloven

(that we in good faith accept and heartily believe the doctrine which, **conformably** God's Holy Word, is contained in the adopted forms of unity of the NHK).

The Dutch word *overeenkomstig* is ambiguous, it can mean 'in so far as [it is in agreement]' (*quatenus*), 'because [it is in agreement]' (*quia*) or even 'as being [in agreement]' (*quippe*).

The *quatenus* position is: we bind to the confessions *in so far as* or *to the extent that* they agree with God's Word. Strictly speaking, the term *quatenus* simply makes a statement about the character of the relationship between the confessions and God's Word. From a linguistic point of view, the *quatenus* reading would indicate that confessional binding has as its ground the factual existence of a relationship between the confessions and Scripture.

The *quia* position is: we bind to the confessions *because* they agree with God's Word. This term makes a statement about the substance of the confessions and their relationship to God's Word. From a linguistic point of view, the *quia* reading would indicate that confessional binding has as its ground the mutual concurrence of the full substance of the confessions with Scripture.

The *quippe* position is: we bind to the confessions *as being* in agreement with God's Word. This term also makes a statement about the contents of the confessions and their relationship to God's Word. Although from a theoretical point of view it is difficult to see how *quippe* differs from *quia*,⁹²⁴ it was intended to indicate that confessional binding has as its ground the mutual concurrence of the contents of the confessions *in general* with Scripture.

The *quippe* position featured only briefly in the Dutch debate. It soon turned out to be an ill-chosen and unsuitable compromise. Hence I restrict myself to the *quia* and *quatenus* positions.

Strictly speaking, *quia* and *quatenus* are not mutually exclusive. *Quatenus* is a qualitative term, merely indicating that there is a relationship between two concepts (in this case: 'the confessions' and 'God's Word'). The term *quia*, however, goes a step further by quantifying this relationship more specifically, by indicating that it is one of mutual and total congruence. From a strictly lexical perspective, the difference between the *quia* and *quatenus* positions relates only to the ground for doctrinal binding. Lexically speaking, the *quia* position posits as the ground of doctrinal binding the existence of a relationship between the substance of the confessions and Scripture, namely, the congruence of this substance with Scripture. Lexically speaking, the *quatenus* position posits as the ground for doctrinal binding merely the existence of a relationship between the substance of the confessions and Scripture. One might describe the *quia* position as stating, 'the confession is in everything in agreement with God's Word' and the *quatenus* position as stating, 'the confessions are related to God's Word'. Strictly speaking, every *quia* position is a *quatenus* position.

In practice, however, the matter is less clear. If someone holding the *quatenus* position opposes the *quia* position, the situation suggests that the *quatenus*-advocate is not convinced that the confessions are in *total* agreement with God's Word. Then *quatenus* no longer means 'in so far as' but 'only in so far as'. In this way, the term *quatenus* receives a quantitative connotation. That is precisely how *quia*-advocates understood the *quatenus* position and attacked it. As the situation would have it, most *quatenus*-advocates⁹²⁵ indeed did object to the *quia*-position. They did so, not because *quia*-advocates shifted the ground for doctrinal binding from the relationship confessions-Scripture to the contents of the confessions, but because *quia*-advocates argued that the contents of the confessions were in every detail Scriptural.

As a result, though the *quia-quatenus* debate should have simply been a debate about the grounds for confessional binding, it transformed into a debate on the extent to which the substance of the confessions of Dutch Reformed Christians reflected Scripture.

*Heringa's position on confessional subscription (2.5.2.7) seems to be somewhat of an enigma to scholars. On the one hand, I note how Heringa, both in his tract and as advisor to Synod 1835, defended a substantive binding of the quia sort. On the other hand, Heringa was a Supernaturalist whose convictions did not always rhyme with the Calvinistic Reformed faith. Nor did Heringa specify what doctrines he believed should be maintained. I believe the solution to this enigma lies in the fact that Heringa in the early 1830s belonged to the older generation of Supernaturalists. Unlike his students, Heringa did not take Supernaturalist presuppositions to their logical end, but sought refuge in a pragmatic traditionalism. This explains why Heringa defended the existence of confessions primarily via the 'natural line' of argument; while Scripture is mentioned it does not truly function in his argument. Since on the one hand Heringa did not accurately quantify the relationship between the confessions and Scripture, and on the other hand did emphasize a close relationship between confessions and Scripture, I consider it more appropriate to describe Heringa's position not as that of a moderate quia but as that of a far-reaching quatenus.*⁹²⁶

⁹²⁴ See Hooijer, *Kerkelijke Wetten*, 57-58.

⁹²⁵ I consider Heringa to be an exception. On Heringa see 2.5.2.7.

⁹²⁶ Volger writes that Heringa defended neither the "fixed and immovable *quia*" nor the "capricious, undependable and individualistic *quatenus*", "as it were he stood in between the parties." (Volger, *Leer*, 167.) Rullmann and De Groot define Heringa's position as that of a "moderate *quia*" (*gematigd quia*). (Rullmann, *Afscheiding*, 120; De Groot, "Heringa", 230) Vree avoids the *quia-quatenus* label, though he does note that Heringa failed to specify precisely which doctrines ought to be maintained (Vree, "Heringa").

At first one sees *quia* and *quatenus* advocates opposed to each other. Later, however, there are pleas for both *quia* and *quatenus* (e.g. Heldring, 2.8.2.2 and Kuyper, 2.9.2.6). These are attempts to differentiate between the layers in confessing, or between the form and substance of confessions, and the consequences such distinctions have for confessional binding. Volten even argued that the *quia* and *quatenus* threads are sometimes so interwoven as to be inseparable (2.12.2.3). I believe that, in terms of the original debate, the *quatenus* position is more proper than the *quia* position: the *quatenus* position takes into account the fact that confessions and Scripture are not directly linked. However, given the turns the debate has taken, I believe the Reformed do well to avoid the terms *quia* and *quatenus*, so as to avoid confusion in the debate. It is more advisable to use new terms and distinctions, such as ‘layers in confessing’.

3.4.6.3 THE AUTHORITY IN PRACTICE

The field of law distinguishes between substantive law and formal law. Confessional binding is an aspect of formal law: it regulates binding to the confessing of the church. I have already reviewed the character of the authority of confessional binding. A question that still remains is who is authorized to practise this authority? I will first describe the various positions that exist on this (3.4.6.2.1), and then consider which is appropriate (3.4.6.2.2).

3.4.6.3.1 The Agent that Binds

Who actually enforces subscription and determines its extent? Positions held in Dutch Reformed circles are the following.

Ecclesiastical binding is a binding that is enforced by the highest or broadest body of the church. In practice, this is the national or general synod. However, such an approach neglects the fact that the church is one and catholic. Strictly speaking, only an ecumenical council should then have this power. It might, therefore, be more appropriate, to speak of **federative binding**. An objection to this phrase is, however, that it emphasizes the contractarian character of confessional binding at the expense of other factors.

Regional-congregational binding is a binding that is enforced by an ecclesiastical body that is not the highest or broadest body of the church. This may be a regional synod, a classis, or the church council. This tends to mean that while the national church has a set of confessional material, narrower assemblies can decide to what extent this set of confessional material is binding. The substance of binding material may thus vary within the one church from region to region, congregation to congregation.

Individual binding is a binding that is determined by an individual person. This type of binding is in fact totally undefined; it is the absence of binding, in practice.

Most doctrinally orthodox Dutch Reformed churches practise ecclesiastical binding. In 1841-42, the NHK chose regional-congregational binding: the PS-boards were to determine what was within the boundaries of confessing. The Meyboom and Zaalberg cases in 1854 indicate that, in practice, the NHK held to individual binding. Regional-congregational binding is also characteristic for the NGK, though the NGK also knows a measure of individual binding.⁹²⁷ Between 1951 and 2004, the official standpoint of the NHK was an individual binding, to which a substantial number of congregations, usually in co-operation with each other, reacted by introducing regional-congregational binding. This approach was continued by and in the PKN. However, churches stepped out of the PKN to form the NHK(HV), in part because the confessional base of the PKN was broader than that of the NHK to the point of being internally contradictory; it was then thought that a regional-congregational binding could not endorse all of the confessing of the church.

⁹²⁷ Congregational binding is also characteristic for congregationalist churches, at least in the nineteenth century; see Schaff, *Creeeds of Christendom*, 1:828-829.

For the sake of completeness, I note the existence of what might termed a **religio-political** binding. By this, I understand a binding that extends beyond the boundaries of the church, primarily serving the political end of maintaining religious peace in society. Such a binding is enforced by the government—in Dutch history during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the federal and provincial governments.⁹²⁸

3.4.6.3.2 The Appropriate Practice

Individual binding is in fact an absence of binding. It incorrectly rejects the rights of the church to practise and enforce binding to its confessing. Individual binding is thus not an appropriate practice.

The authority to bind to its confessing belongs to the church. The church is here the body that may be designated *ecclesia completa*. Thus the local congregation has the right and obligation to exercise doctrinal authority. However, the local congregation does not stand alone: it holds the faith in common with other local congregations. In view of the doctrine of connectionalism, the exercise of this authority is not beholden to the local church.

I thus disagree with Hofstede de Groot, who denied ecclesiastical assemblies the right to judge issues of doctrine and faith (2.5.2.5). Volten is correct in assuming that synodical assemblies have a right to consider matters of faith (2.12.2.3).

It is not, however, necessary to make a choice between regional-congregational binding and ecclesiastical or federative binding. There are elements in confessions that are explicitly binding throughout the catholic church, and there are elements explicitly binding in a sector of the catholic church: be it a national church, a regional church, or a local church.

For example, while all churches are to understand marriage as an institution of God in which a man and a woman are joined to become one flesh, only those churches that exist in a context where same-sex relations and marriages are tolerated need bind to explicit statements on this point.

The combination of ecclesiastical and regional-congregational binding was practised in the classis Walcheren after the adoption of the Walcheren Articles, and in some classes of the GKN after the decisions with respect to Geelkerken.

In view of the catholicity and unity of the church, a national, regional or local church considering making something confessionally binding should always consult other churches to see to what extent they have dealt with the issue and how they have decided to act in response. In connection with a defining confession (3.3.10), it would mean that the thesis statements, anti-thetical statements and their scripture proof are explicitly binding throughout the catholic church, but that the sections of ‘accepting’ and ‘rejecting’ are explicitly binding throughout the local, regional, or national church. Thus it is not a matter of the general synod binding *or* a lesser ecclesiastical assembly binding. Instead, it is a matter of binding to what is specific to the context in which the binding is to function.

The discussions during the 1960s within the GKN(v) on this point—whether an ecclesiastical assembly should be involved and, if so, which—are not clear. Part of the problem was that one camp argued that regional-congregational binding was sufficient, whilst the other considered it insufficient. At the same time, persons within both camps identified elements in the confessions as not binding. Telder argued that the Heidelberg Catechism erred on the issue of the intermediate state. Wiskerke objected to the definition of God in the Belgic Confession as a simple being. H. J. Schilder was not convinced that the law could be divided over two tables. Telder was chided for not having submitted his thoughts to the broader assemblies for approval before promoting them. I wonder, though, whether Wiskerke and Schilder submitted theirs. After all, what’s good for the goose, is good for the gander. Wiskerke and Schilder may have been correct in their opinion that their objections were not substantive while Telder’s were. But surely an ecclesiastical assembly should have decided this?

⁹²⁸ See Van Eijnatten, *Liberty and Concord*, 7.

The foregoing presumes a defining confession of the sort described in 3.3.10. However, the churches do not have such confessions. This further complicates the issue. I have already argued that in the present situation, differentiating complete subscription is to be preferred (3.4.4.3.3).

When a doctrinal issue is drawn into question, ecclesiastical assemblies are to decide to what extent the confessing of the church is actually in danger. It is insufficient to leave this matter to the church council alone. Not only does wisdom require the involvement of a multiple number of those trained in doctrinal issues (ministers), but connectionalism has as a consequence that the church broader than the local church be involved. Given the federative approach to church structures, I would suggest that doctrinal issues be considered by a church council and the classis to which the church council belongs, with the involvement of deputies from regional synods as representatives of the association of churches. For practical purposes, it may also be advisable, instead of working with deputies from regional synods, to follow the route chosen by, for example, the PKN and federatively create a committee Theology that can assist ecclesiastical assemblies in considering doctrinal issues. One could also choose committees with a specialization in certain issues, as the GKN(v) has done.⁹²⁹

The problem with this approach is that in the course of time there could be regional differences in what is considered confessionally binding. One classis may consider it contrary to the confessing of the church to admit children to the Lord's Supper or to condone freemasonry while another may not.

Such regional differences exist within the NGK and the CGKN. Though the differences are often not considered to be 'confessional', the consequences attached are not unlike those attached to confessional differences (e.g. no pulpit exchange between congregations).

The existence of various associations of churches in The Netherlands all with the same confessions and yet unwilling or unable to join in one association—the Dutch have coined the phrase 'ten times reformed' for this⁹³⁰—is also an illustration of 'regional differences'.

In view of the fact that the church is to be united in faith, it would be appropriate if the broader assemblies became involved in deciding the confessional substance of an issue when disparity arises between local or regional churches. This approach could be used by the broadest assembly of the church to weed *theologoumena* out of the confessions. It could also prove helpful in coming to a confession of the format described in 3.3.10.

3.4.6.4 SUMMARY

With respect to the authority of subscription, three elements can be identified. Confessions are substantively authoritative because they reflect Scripture, and formally authoritative because they are fixed by the church. The ecclesiastical authority is, however, not merely horizontal (contractarian), it is also vertical (indwelling of the Spirit). Thirdly, the binding is authoritative because a person agrees to be bound by the confessions: he recognizes the authority of the substance of the confession and acknowledges the authority of the confession as an ecclesiastical document.

In the practice of confessional binding, empirical analysis indicates three agents: the national church (ecclesiastical or federative binding), the regional or local church (regional-congregational binding), and the individual person (individual binding—in fact, no binding). The most appropriate practice would seem to be a combination of ecclesiastical or federative and regional-congregational binding. There are elements to the confessing of the church that are always and everywhere relevant, and elements that have a limited effect. The practical consequences of this approach, in so far as they are not desirable, can be overcome.

⁹²⁹ Such committees exist for matters relating to marriage, divorce and remarriage and for situations of sexual misconduct by office bearers. These committees act purely as counsellors, advising ecclesiastical assemblies (usually church councils) how they might act.

⁹³⁰ The phrase seems to have originated with the publication of Aalders, *Tien Keer Gereformeerd*.

All said and done, confessional binding and subscription would be a much simpler issue if the confessional documents were clearer in their structure as to what is binding and what is not. The foregoing makes clear that it is high time that the church write a defining confession.

3.4.7 SUBSCRIPTION IN PRACTICE

At this point, I have covered the more theoretical aspects to subscription. There are also practical issues that require attention. In this subsection I will look at practical issues surrounding the moment of subscription, and in the following subsection I will look at practical issues relating to the maintenance of subscription.

I will begin this subsection with a brief outline of historical data (3.4.7.1). Then I will look at the subscription itself: the various ways of subscribing, including a discussion on the role of ordination vows (3.4.7.2), the reason for using forms of subscription (3.4.7.3), and the use of signatures (3.4.7.4). Other practical aspects are whether the church should also sign (3.4.7.5), what belongs in the church order and what in the form of subscription (3.4.7.6), and the moment of subscription (3.4.7.7). The nature of the material is such that everything affects everything else, so that final conclusions tend to be drawn in 3.4.7.7.

3.4.7.1 HISTORICAL DATA

In general, the Dutch tradition has been to have church members bind themselves to the confessing of the church via the promise made when professing one's faith, and to have office bearers and other functionaries subscribe either by means of placing one's signature beneath the confessions or by means of a form of subscription. In 1951, the NHK decided that three questions (confirmed by a signature) would suffice, a practice continued by the PKN.

Originally, subscription took place in the ecclesiastical assembly, either the church council or the classis. It was not considered part of the ordination process. There has been a movement in the late twentieth century in some circles to have subscription take place before the congregation, usually in the context of a worship service. There have also been differing practices with respect to when subscription exactly takes place. Under AR-1816, subscription was limited to only those who could preach the word, and thus it only took place once during the official service of a minister, at the moment when he became a *'proponent'*. It is customary for ministers to subscribe when they begin a ministry in a new church. If this ministry is in the same classis as before, ministers do not subscribe again at the classis. If it is in a different classis, ministers do subscribe again.

Because Dutch Reformed churches practise term-eldership and term-deaconship, elders and deacons subscribe the confessions every time they come into a new term in office, regardless of whether they have subscribed the confessions in the congregation in the past.

3.4.7.2 ORAL AND WRITTEN SUBSCRIPTION

A person can make clear that he is bound to the confessions in three ways. The most basic way is to take an **oral oath**. This is practised by the Dutch Reformed when it comes to public profession of faith. During the worship service, those professing their faith express their conviction that the doctrine of Scripture, summarized in the [confession] and taught in the church in which they are professing their faith is the complete doctrine of salvation.

I agree with Wiskerke (2.14.2.1.4) that there is no difference between an oath and a promise (vow). A promise explicitly made before the throne of God has the weight of an oath.

The second way is known as **simple subscription**. One simply places one's signature beneath the confessions of the church. This approach was commonly practised in Dutch Reformed churches in the sixteenth century, and continued to be used for elders and deacons in many Dutch Reformed churches well into the twentieth century.

The third way is by signing a **form of subscription**. The subscriber places a signature beneath a form that outlines what one is subscribing, and what rights and duties this implies. Some Dutch Reformed churches already used such forms as early as 1574. In some Dutch Reformed circles,

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this approach has also been adopted for elders and deacons. The reason for using a form seems to have been to spell out explicitly what subscription precisely entailed.

The question is apposite what is the relationship between the four ordination vows and the form of subscription. Do these not overlap each other?

The questions or vows currently in use in the GKN(v) are:

First, do you feel in your heart that God Himself, through His congregation, has called you to this holy ministry?

Second, do you accept the Old and the New Testament as the only Word of God and the complete doctrine of salvation and do you reject all doctrines conflicting with it?

Third, do you promise faithfully to discharge the duties of your office and to adorn the doctrine of God with a godly life?

Fourth, do you also promise to submit to the discipline of the church in case you should become delinquent in doctrine or life?⁹³¹

It will be clear that the ordination questions are broader than the current forms of subscription. The first and third questions are not found in FS-1619 and related forms. I have already indicated, though, that I consider the substance of the third vow appropriate for a form of subscription (3.4.4.2a).

FS-1619 and related forms are more or less directly related to the second ordination vow. There is an important difference, though. With the second ordination vow, those being ordained make a public profession of faith. In this ordination vow, there is no reference to the confessions of the church.⁹³² The first paragraph in FS-1619 is in fact an additional sentence to this vow. It makes clear that the office bearer considers the doctrine of these Scriptures, which he accepts only as God's Word and the complete doctrine of salvation, to be contained in the confessions of the Church.

The fourth ordination vow is parallel to the second or promissory part of FS-1619 and related forms. The form of subscription spells out what is implicitly meant in this fourth question. I have already indicated that I consider it appropriate to introduce subscription to the church order and related materials (3.4.4.2a), which would cover the material found in the fourth vow.

One could thus conclude that there is a measure of overlap between the ordination vows and the form of subscription. It would seem that, even though the vows and forms have been in use in various circles for over 200 years, the two have not really been brought into line with each other.⁹³³

It would seem that these two—the ordination vows and the form of subscription—have separate origins. The first paragraph of the form of subscription goes back at least to 1574. The ordination questions were formulated by GS Dordrecht 1578 and GS Middelburg 1581, based on the questions used by Á Lasco and Micron. The use of a liturgical form was prescribed by GS Den Haag 1586 (CO-1586 art. 4). The oldest known edition of the form for ordination is found printed in the back of a Dutch Bible dating to 1590. GS Dordrecht 1618-19 adopted both the form for ordination and the form of subscription.⁹³⁴

⁹³¹ Originally there were three questions. The third and fourth questions together formed the original third question. GKN(v), *Gereformeerd Kerkboek*, 543, 548, 553. The vows are identical for ministers, missionaries, elders, and deacons.

⁹³² Noteworthy is the fact that this is different from the liturgical forms for baptism and public profession of faith.

⁹³³ It is noteworthy that Schokking does not even deal with the ordination vows in his study.

⁹³⁴ De Cock (jr.), *Historisch Overzicht*; Biesterveld and Hoekstra, *Het Gereformeerd Kerkboek*, 240-259; Trimp, *Formulieren en Gebeden*, 63-66; Van Rongen, *Our Reformed Church Service Book*, 226.

Because the ordination vows originated with Micron and á Lasco during the 1550s,⁹³⁵ the absence of a reference to confessional documents is easily explained. When the ordination questions were formulated, there were no confessional documents in the Dutch language. It is rather curious, however, that the confessional documents were not introduced into the ordination vow once they did exist.⁹³⁶ I think the churches would do well to do so.

Making this suggestion raises the question whether the first paragraph of the form of subscription has not become superfluous thereby. Is there still a need to acknowledge in writing the confessing of the church to be in accordance with the Word of God? From the current perspective (the local congregation), I believe not. However, there is yet another perspective to this issue. For while the ordination vows are used in the local congregation, the form of subscription was originally used only in the classis. Since other factors are also important, that perspective and its consequences will be further explored in 3.4.7.7.

The question is also legitimate whether the promissory sections in the ordination vows and the form of subscription should not be brought more in line with each other. I have already argued that it is legitimate to introduce into the form of subscription a binding to the church order and to a code of conduct (3.4.4.2a). These matters are, to a degree, already found in the ordination vows. Here too, from the perspective of unnecessary doubling up, one could argue that these matters need not be addressed by a form of subscription. However, there are reasons why they should yet be included in such a form. Again, I will explain this further in 3.4.7.7.

3.4.7.3 THE USE OF FORMS

A form of subscription was used as early as 1574 in Zeeland, after what is commonly considered to be the first synod on Dutch soil, Synod Dordrecht 1574.⁹³⁷ In 1605, FS-Walcheren-1574 fell into disuse, but in 1610 a form was re-introduced. It was primarily in the struggle against the Remonstrants that forms of subscription became commonly used throughout the Low Countries. General consensus is that such forms were used because Remonstrants and their opponents differed as to the precise implications of subscription. What better way to solve this problem, so the churches seemed to think in those days, than to spell out what is meant by it? This is also the background to the GKN(v) tightening up the use of forms of subscription during the 1960s and 1970s.⁹³⁸

In 1816, an attempt was made to have doctrinal binding removed, and with it the use of a form of subscription (2.4.2). This attempt failed, in part on account of resistance from ministers concerned about the doctrinal faithfulness of the church, and in part because removal threatened to cause unrest in the churches. Even changing the way of subscribing met with resistance. It was not until 1951 that the NHK saw its way free to drop the form of subscription altogether. It made use of three vows at the moment a candidate sought permission to preach for the first time, and had this vow ‘confirmed’ by way of a signature. The PKN continues this approach.

There are, it would seem, various reasons for using a form giving a detailed description of confessional subscription. The most obvious is to ensure uniformity on this point, and has its

⁹³⁵ Micron, *Christlicke Ordinancien*, 50-51. It is interesting to note that Micron inserted into the second question the doctrinal issue of the incarnation of Christ (over against the Anabaptists).

⁹³⁶ This oddity is not unlike the difference between CO-1619 (prescribing subscription to the Belgic Confession) and FS-1619 (practising subscription to the Three Forms of Unity).

⁹³⁷ This synod was, technically speaking, a provincial synod. For political reasons, only the churches from Zeeland and a portion of Zuid-Holland were represented, the other parts of Holland still being occupied by Spanish forces. However, once liberated the churches of Noord-Holland adopted the acts of this synod. For this reason it is often counted among the national synods. (Biesterveld and Kuyper, *Handboekje*, xx).

⁹³⁸ Interestingly, just as the NGK-GKN(v) debate bypassed the Canadian Reformed Churches, so too the tightening up of forms of subscription bypassed the CanRC. It was not until 2001 that the CanRC adopted a federatively binding form of subscription. Up until that moment each church could draw up its own.

origin in a context of doubt, mistrust, and lack of clarity.⁹³⁹ However, one may extend this to all the attributes of the church. Detailed subscription is useful to ensure the unity, catholicity, sanctity, and apostolicity of the church. Binding to confessions ensures the church in all places and in all times holds the same faith. Binding to confessions ensures that the church keeps itself pure from false doctrine and conformed to the faith passed on to the church by the apostles.

3.4.7.4 THE USE OF A SIGNATURE

The use of seals, signet rings, and signatures is an old practice. It makes clear that the signed or sealed declaration is authentic. Not all orthodox reformed churches require a signature. Churches with a Presbyterian origin tend to make use of an oral vow. Why then do the Dutch Reformed choose a signature?

The most obvious answer is that this is how it has traditionally come to be. I have not been able to research why the churches as early as 1574 chose a signature. The most obvious reason would seem to be that such a signature requires no further testimony as to its authenticity. The confirmation that an oral vow was made would require reliable witnesses, which would then have to be found. A signature is probably the most efficient way to go.

It would seem to me that, traditionally, public profession of faith could not have been confirmed with a signature. Most people were illiterate (even as late as the 1840s—cf. 2.6.2.2). This would suggest why, even today, public profession of faith remains a merely oral matter. I see no reason why this practice cannot be continued. However, I have my doubts whether the practice of signing is necessary and wise for all office bearers today. I will return to this in 3.4.7.7.

3.4.7.5 SHOULD THE CHURCH COUNTERSIGN?

The use of a signature can also be seen as proof of an agreement between a person and a community. I have already indicated that there is a contractarian element to subscribing the confessing of the church. It is common practice in society to have such a contract confirmed with signatures.

The question may then be asked, should not the form of subscription take the format of a contract, signed by both the subscriber and the church, with two copies, one for the church and one for the subscriber? Careful reading of FS-1619 and subsequent forms based thereon indicates that the form of subscription describes rights and duties not only of the subscriber but also of the church. In the liturgical form for ordination, a charge is given not only to the office bearers, but also to the congregation. In Presbyterian circles, it is common for the congregation to respond to a number of questions as well. Countersigning documents in duplicate with a copy for each party is common in Dutch society. Should this practice also not be applied in the church?

I believe not. The form of subscription comprises an acknowledgement and a promise (number of promises). It does not fall into the category of contracts but of oaths, and oaths are never countersigned by those asking the oath.

3.4.7.6 CHURCH ORDER OR FORM OF SUBSCRIPTION?

A commonly heard objection to FS-1619 and related forms is that they are very detailed in spelling out the rights and privileges of office bearers and the ecclesiastical assemblies. The historical reason for doing so—the constant attempts of Remonstrants to avoid giving account of their views—makes this detailed exposition understandable. However, it would seem to be overkill to continue spelling out these matters today. It creates an air of suspicion that is not appreciated by those unacquainted with the phenomenon.

In addition, there are elements in the form of subscription that do not properly belong there. At some points, FS-1619 and related forms describe the rights and duties of the church with respect to the subscriber. In doing so, the form of subscription is more detailed than CO-1619 articles 53 and

⁹³⁹ See Schokking, *Leertucht*, 199-214.

54 and later versions. As a result, the curious situation is created in which the procedures for dealing with doctrinal deviations have to be derived from the form of subscription. It would be more proper to have the Church Order (or a set of subsidiary regulations) outline the procedures, rather than the form of subscription.

Since these elements are primarily concerned with what happens after subscription, I leave off suggesting a formulation for such a church order article until I have considered the various elements in 3.4.8.

3.4.7.7 THE MOMENT OF BINDING

With respect to the moment of binding, a number of observations may be made.

Those churches practising Dortian polity tend to have ministers sign the form of subscription twice, not only in the church council but also in the classis. Further, while the ordination vows do not reference the confessions, reference is made to personal convictions with respect to divine doctrine. Moreover, the ordination vow is taken in a worship service before the congregation; the signing of the form of subscription traditionally takes place in the church council. Finally, because Dortian polity practises term-eldership, elders and deacons sign the form of subscription at the commencement of every term. In the NHK and PKN, a form of subscription or oath is taken only when one is granted access to the pulpit (when one becomes a *proponent*); subscription for elders and deacons has been in disuse since 1816.

This practice raises two questions. First of all, what is the difference between taking the ordination vow in a local congregation and signing a form of subscription in the church council meeting? Secondly, why should ministers sign a form of subscription twice, locally and classically, and why should elders and deacons sign every time they enter a new term of office?

3.4.7.7.1 Ordination Vows and Form of Subscription

General practice since GS Dordrecht 1619 has been to sign the form of subscription in the classis or a meeting of the church council. The CGKN and GKN[s] have even prescribed this in their church orders.⁹⁴⁰ However, for a short while there was while a tendency in the GKN(v) to have this subscription take place in the presence of the congregation, whether during or immediately after the worship service in which the subscriber is ordained or installed.

It should be noted, though, that the form of subscription was never intended to be a liturgical document.⁹⁴¹ It is possible that the introduction of a profession of faith into FS-1816 has given rise to the idea that subscription to the confessions by way of a form is analogous to public profession of faith. I have already made clear that subscription via a form was not originally intended by GS Dordrecht 1618-19 to be such a profession of faith (3.4.2). The profession of faith element is lacking in FS-1619 and related forms. It is only found in the ordination questions. I have also already indicated that there is no reason why the ordination vows, if brought in line with the main substance of the form of subscription, could not suffice at the local level.

In fact, I consider it very likely that there was no such thing as a form of subscription to be signed in the local congregation originally. PS Dordrecht 1574 prescribed simple subscription for ministers, elders, deacons and schoolmasters.⁹⁴² Classis Walcheren subsequently introduced a form of subscription, which was signed classically. PS Dordrecht 1574 had not specified ordination vows at this stage. GS Dordrecht 1578 seemed to take a step backwards: subscription was prescribed for ministers and professors, and was considered desirable for elders, but deacons were not mentioned. GS Middelburg 1581 prescribed subscription for all parties; GS Den Haag 1586 only for ministers, professors, and schoolmasters. Subsequently the various provinces each went

⁹⁴⁰ See CO-1947 (CGKN) article 53 and CO-1955 (GKN[s]) 1955 article 30.

⁹⁴¹ As also noted by a recent general synod of the GKN(v): *Acta...GKN(v)...* 2005: art. 48 grond 3.

⁹⁴² CO-1574 article 30 (subscription by elders and deacons) does speak of '*na de forme*'. This however, does not point to the signing of a form, but is to be read in the sense of 'according to the manner of'.

their own way when it came to subscription. The overall impression is thus that the practice was diffuse. Understandably, GS Dordrecht 1618-19 left the issue of (simple) subscription by elders and deacons to the classes and local churches. Forms of subscription were only intended for use by the classis.

I have not been able to date the use of forms of subscription for elders and deacons.⁹⁴³ The practice of simple subscription existed at least in Wijk bij Duurstede before 1816 (2.4.4). In 1947, the CGKN prescribed a brief form of subscription for elders and deacons, and a longer form in 1966. In 1955, the GKN[s] prescribed simple subscription for elders and deacons. In 1978, the use of a form of subscription for elders and deacons was prescribed by the GKN(v). The tendency towards uniformity in practice would thus seem to be of very recent date.

Simple subscription was a way to ensure that the local office bearers were Reformed. It was primarily aimed at making the unity of the church explicit. If this element was introduced into the ordination vows, there would be no need for a separate form of subscription at the local level. Oral subscription would suffice. This is certainly the case if the ordination vows also included aspects I consider wanting in the form of subscription, such as binding to the church order, the promise of an exemplary life (3.4.2.2a), and, if the church order were to outline the various procedures in case of doctrinal unfaithfulness, procedures presently described only in the form of subscription (3.4.7.6; cf. 3.4.8)).

I believe there is no reason why the form of subscription in the local congregation could not be dropped altogether, provided the Church Order and the ordination vows were revised.

3.4.7.7.2 Signing the Form More Than Once

Some churches practising Dortian polity, such as the GKN(v), will have ministers subscribe the confessions twice, both in the church council and the classis. Subscribing in the church council relates to their work in the local congregation; it would seem that ministers subscribed the confessions as ‘elders’.⁹⁴⁴ Subscribing at the classis relates to their work for the association of churches (as well as beyond the classis). This subscription is repeated at the local level every time a minister transfers to a new congregation, and classically every time he transfers to a new classis. If a minister transfers to a new congregation within the same classis, the classical subscription is not repeated.

I consider it likely that subscription via a form was initially only intended classically. It is understandable that in places where elders and deacons subscribed locally, the practice arose that the ministers also subscribed locally. However, this was not a practice in all local churches. CO-1619 did not prescribe subscription for elders and deacons, and the matter was left to the local churches and classes to regulate. Of course, CO-1618 did prescribe the use of the form for ordination. While in its ordination vows this form did not explicitly articulate confessional subscription, it would have been commonly expected that one promised fidelity to the teachings of the Reformed Church. Finally, the provincial governments enforced confessional subscription between 1619 and 1795: local subscription for ministers would have had little added meaning. AR-1816 dropped local subscription. Among both Seceders and *Dolerenden*, local subscription was (re)introduced.⁹⁴⁵ It would seem that with this (re)introduction, it became customary for ministers in the GKN to subscribe locally. They did so, it would seem, not as ministers of the word, but as

⁹⁴³ In the GKN of Hoek the form of subscription dates to 29 May 1903, the day the church was instituted. Interestingly, the handwriting used for all officebearers up until 1921 is identical. The same has happened with the form used in the CAGK (A church) of Axel. The first signature dates to 1870, the handwriting changes in 1904. The NDGK (B church) of Axel practiced simple subscription; the first signatures are undated, the first dated signature is 1909. On 4 December 1913 a form of subscription was adopted by the GKN of Axel (merger of the A and B churches). (The material in this note is based on archival research in the GKN(v)s of Hoek and Axel.)

⁹⁴⁴ This changed in the GKN(v) in 1978; see 2.14.2.1.8.

⁹⁴⁵ As is evidenced by the subscription practice of the Seceded and *Dolerende* churches in Axel.

elders of the local congregation.⁹⁴⁶ In the GKN[s], this was thus regulated in 1959 (cf. 2.12.2.7.10). It is noteworthy that in the CGKN, the church order demands that ministers only subscribe at the classis.⁹⁴⁷

However, is the practice of double subscribing necessary and proper? It is important for the congregation to know that those ordained to office accept the doctrine confessed and taught by the church. Thus I consider it proper for every new office bearer in the church to articulate his binding to the confession before the congregation. I have already argued that this acknowledgement and these promises could be stated more clearly in the ordination vows. If this is clearly stated in those vows, there is, I believe, no need to have this further confirmed by signing a form of subscription. Substantially, such a form will add nothing to the ordination questions. Thus while it is proper for office bearers to indicate their bond with the confession when they are ordained, it is not necessary to have them do this via a form of subscription.

Abolishing the local form of subscription and making use of the ordination vows will also fill a desire felt in the churches and currently attempted to be met by having newly ordained office bearers sign the form of subscription during or immediately after a worship service.

What of the minister who also signs classically? The classical subscription is not with a view to the local churches but with a view to the association of churches, or rather, with a view to the catholic church. In the exercise of their office, elders and deacons are limited to the boundaries of the local congregation. Ministers, however, also labour in teaching and preaching in congregations not their own. In order to preserve the unity, sanctity, and apostolicity of the catholic church, it makes sense to have ministers also acknowledge the confessions and make their promises towards the association of churches. In the tradition of Dort, the classis is considered to be the representative of the catholic church.

The need to uphold the unity, catholicity, sanctity and apostolicity of the church is undeniable. Ensuring this need is met by having ministers of the Word sign a form of subscription makes sense. Given the weight of the matter—we are here talking of ministry to the catholic church—it is understandable that one not only chooses oral vows, but also asks for a signature. In order to spell out what the signature means, it makes sense to have a form to be subscribed, rather than choosing simple subscription. Moreover, history teaches that forms have proved helpful. It would be unwise to drop the practice. Even the NHK and PKN decided to continue to have vows confirmed by a signature.

Should a minister sign the form of subscription every time he transfers from one classis to another? In our time of communication, this practice is somewhat strange. In the Dortian tradition, members who have professed their faith are accepted in another congregation on the basis of an attestation. They are not required to profess their faith again. Why could not this practice also be adopted for ministers transferring from one classis to another? When a minister leaves a classis, the classis is required to issue a declaration of honourable release. Could not this declaration also

⁹⁴⁶ At least, this would seem to be the case given the local form of subscription in Hoek and the practice in Axel. The form of Hoek began with “We, the undersigned, Elders and Deacons of the Gereformeerde Kerk in Hoek”, yet the first name is that of Rev. P. H. de Jonge (including his title). After 1925 ministers indicated their status not by their title but by adding the letters VDM to their name (Verbi Divini Minister). After 1978, when both signatures and names were listed, the signature would include VDM, the name the title “Ds.” (“Rev.”). In the CAGK (A church) of Axel, the “*kwaliteit*” (“quality”) of the subscriber is listed in a separate column; the first subscriber is a minister and the second is designated “*oud-ouderling*”. In the NDGK (B church) of Axel a number of names are preceded with the title “Ds.” The form adopted in 1913, when the A and B churches merged, began with “We the undersigned, elders and deacons of the Gereformeerde Kerk in Axel”, yet the first two names are those of Rev. Chr. Bruins and Rev. J. H. Lammertsma (including titles).

⁹⁴⁷ With thanks to Dr. H. Selderhuis, currently professor in church polity at the Theological University of the CGKN in Apeldoorn. However, Dr. J. Maris, professor in dogmatics and symbolics at the same university, indicated to me that when a minister he also signed a subscription in the church council upon being ordained or installed, the same form as elders and deacons.

indicate that a particular minister has subscribed the confessions? Repeated signing within an association of churches would seem superfluous. It stands to reason that the form used by the various classes in the association of churches should be identical.

However, if a minister transfers from one association of churches to another, renewed subscription makes sense. In a new association of churches, a different church order functions, the doctrinal points in discussion may be different, *et cetera*. It is customary for a minister entering a new association of churches to be subjected to a *colloquium doctum*, a learned discussion in which critical points are debated to ascertain the convictions of the minister. In combination with the *colloquium*, the form of subscription could be signed.

Assuming a minister need only sign a form of subscription once, when should this take place? Synod Emden could be understood to indicate that it is the moment a person enters the ministry. AR-1816 determined that this take place when a person became a *proponent*. At this point, a person gained access to the pulpits in an association of churches but was not yet a minister. While I believe it is proper for a proponent also to sign a form of subscription, I do not think that this should be the signature applying to the office of minister. Not all *proponenten* become ministers. To be a minister, one must be called by and attached to a congregation. The proper moment for the signing is when one has been called by a congregation and been examined by the classis with a positive outcome.⁹⁴⁸ When the way is open to ordination in a local congregation, the minister can sign the form of subscription in the classis: as Emden put it ‘prior to entering their service’.

In short, I propose that ministers sign a form of subscription in the classis, and do so once with respect to an association of churches. When transferring from one classis to another, the declaration of honourable release would indicate that a minister has signed the form of subscription.

This would leave the signing by *proponenten* open. In view of the fact that they too serve the churches in a certain function, and are examined to that end by the classis, I suggest that it would be appropriate for them to subscribe via a set form when given access to the pulpits of an association of churches.⁹⁴⁹

I return now to the elders and deacons, for in the Dortian tradition many are also required to sign the form of subscription more than once in their lifetime. The reason for this is that Dortian polity practises term offices. A person serves as elder or deacon for a specified term (usually three or four years). When the term is finished, the person is no longer an elder or deacon. If this person, usually after a period of one or two years, is re-elected to office, he is required to sign the form of subscription again. Many wonder whether this is not overdoing it.

From the perspective of term-offices, it is not. Just as a minister, when being ordained in a new congregation, expresses his bond with the confessions anew, so it makes sense for elders and deacons, when being ordained in a new term, to express their bond with the confessions anew. Parents are required to profess their faith anew with the baptism of each newborn child. Why then not have office bearers (and other church labourers) reaffirm their bond with the confessions once every four to six years?⁹⁵⁰

An interesting case was when a deacon in the congregation in which I serve was ordained as an elder. It was decided that the person in question did have to be ordained (he was changing office, accepting a new charge) but did not have to sign the form of subscription, analogous to ministers who transfer within a classis from one congregation to another.

However, the issue could well change if one sees the practice of term-offices not as a matter of being an office bearer or not, but as a matter of continuing to be an office bearer in active or

⁹⁴⁸ This would seem to be the intention also of the NGK as expressed in AKS-2004 art. 17.

⁹⁴⁹ This is the practice in the GKN(v) (*Acta...GKN... 2002-2003*: art. 25).

⁹⁵⁰ Local practice varies from 3 years office bearer and at least 1 year free to 4 years office bearer and at least 2 years free. It is interesting to note that ministers tend to serve in a congregation for generally five to ten years. They thus reaffirm their bond with the confessions once every five to ten years.

passive service. Personally, I am convinced of the latter. In this practice, renewed subscription in the same congregation would indeed be superfluous. However, this debate goes beyond the limits of my study. For it would, among other things, require a different practice surrounding ordination and installation.⁹⁵¹

In conclusion, I note that for elders and deacons (and possibly others serving locally) I would much rather see this (re)affirmation of the bond with the confessions take the form of ordination vows rather than a form of subscription.

This still leaves the matter of professors in theology and church labourers in general. With respect to the latter, I believe one may act analogously to elders and deacons. Upon entering their ministry, church labourers express their bond with the confession of the church, preferably in answer to an appropriate question.

With respect to the professors in theology, the matter is more complicated. In Dutch Reformed circles, ministerial education is traditionally organized under the authority of the church—though not exclusively, as the establishment of the Free University in Amsterdam evidences. It would take me too far afield to explore this avenue. Assuming, for the moment, that the seminary is run by the churches, and assuming that this is executed via the general synod and its deputies, I would suggest that professors in theology sign the subscription at the general synod upon entering their ministry (of teaching).

3.4.7.7.3 Profession of Faith by an Ecclesiastical Assembly

A final matter is the subscribing of the confessions at the beginning of a general synod. The practice was started by the CAGK in 1854, and was continued by the CGKN, GKN, GKN[s] and GKN(v) (cf. 2.7.2.12.2). The intent of this subscription seems to have changed. Initially, the act was a testimony to the world of the faith of the church. However, it seems to have become a confirmation of the confessional faithfulness of the assembly members. Rather than the one-off occurrence near the start of a synod, each delegate, advisor and official visitor to a general synod is asked to express his affinity with the reformed confessions. Within the circles of churches tracing their lineage to the Liberation, doubting this affirmation has been cause for not seating ministers.⁹⁵² This, in spite of the fact that in 1854, synod members decided that such a subscription could not become a reason for inquiry into one's confessional faithfulness.

The current practice is odd, not only in view of its origin, but also in the inconsistency of its practice. Why should delegates, advisors and official visitors to a general synod have to express agreement with the reformed confessions when this is not done at classes and regional synods? Why have members of assemblies to express their personal bond with the confessions when they come with credentials stating that the assembly that sends them professes faithfulness to the confessions?⁹⁵³

I believe the churches that have this practice ought to reinstate the original purpose. Every general synod, as representative of the association of churches holding the same confessions and practising the same church polity, should issue a declaration in which it reasserts its desire to abide by Scripture and to remain in the Reformed tradition. The proper place for this declaration would be immediately upon the general synod's being constituted.

⁹⁵¹ Ordination is when a person enters a particular office for the first time. Installation is when a person enters a particular office for not the first time (e.g. when a minister transfers from one congregation to another, he is installed in the new congregation, not ordained).

⁹⁵² Namely, Rev. B. J. F. Schoep in 1967 (see 2.14.2.1.7) and Rev. F. J. van Hulst at GS Launceston 1998 of the Free Reformed Churches in Australia.

⁹⁵³ I thus disagree with what the reporters to GS Hoogeveen 1969-1970 reported (*Acta...GKN... 1969-1970*: p. 512). The United Reformed Churches in North America have taken this even a step further: at the constitution of a synod all delegates are asked to express their agreement with the form of subscription, which is almost identical to FS-1619.

3.4.7.7.4 Summary

In short, in current practice there is substantive difference between the ordination vows and the form of subscription. However, I do not believe that these differences can be substantiated. If the ordination vows were to contain the basic elements of subscription outlined earlier, I believe that the ordination vows can suffice in the local congregation.

It is proper for ministers to express their being bound to the confession, not only in the local congregation via ordination vows, but also in the classis via a form of subscription. This classical signing is with respect to their labour in the association of churches. In view of the current practice of office, it is proper that elders and deacons (and church labourers) express their bond with the confessions each time they enter a term of office. Finally, I believe it proper that the custom of issuing a testimony of faith at the most general assembly of an association of churches be practised as originally intended.

3.4.7.8 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The foregoing subsection looked at practical issues surrounding the moment of subscription. It is a rather difficult matter to describe in a linear way, since everything affects everything else. It is thus in 3.4.7.7 that everything comes together. I will present a brief summary of this chapter and then conclude with drafts for ordination vows and a form of subscription.

In principle, there is no difference between oral subscription, simple subscription, and form subscription. In principle there is no difference between subscribing FS-1619 and related forms or taking the ordination vows. The more detailed version of subscription probably arose with a view to the unity of the church, and has its origin in a context of doubt, mistrust, and lack of clarity. Detailed subscription is useful to ensure the unity, sanctity, and apostolicity of the catholic church. Why a signature was introduced at a certain stage is not clear. It may simply have been the most efficient way to go—the members of the Council of Nicea 325 already used this form.

The question could be asked whether the church should countersign the confessing. I believe not, since binding to a confession is not a matter of signing a contract but of taking an oath. There is some discontent with FS-1619 and related forms because of the many stipulations they contain. I concur with these sentiments. Because these stipulations concern primarily what happens after subscription, this matter will receive further attention in the following paragraph. Finally I concluded that it is sufficient and advisable to have office bearers and church labourers express their acknowledgement and give their promises via ordination vows. Further, it seems best to me that ministers only sign a form of subscription once during their office in any association of churches, and do so in the classis. Given the present practice of term-office bearers, I consider it proper that elders and deacons (and other church labourers) indicate their bond with the confession at the start of every term of office.

In view of the foregoing and in keeping with the tradition of the Dutch Reformed churches practising Dortian polity, the article in the Church Order on subscription could be revised to read as follows:

B. Binding to the confessing of the church

Members of the church are to express at their admission to communion their agreement with the doctrine confessed and taught by the church by means of the vows adopted for that purpose. Refusal to do so implies no admission to communion.

Those serving in one of the following ministries in the local church—minister, elder, deacon, church labourer—are to express at their ordination their agreement with the doctrine confessed and taught by the church and are to promise to labour in keeping with this confessing by means of the vows adopted for that purpose. Refusal to do so implies no admission to the ministry.

Those serving in one of the following ministries also beyond the local church—minister, professor in theology—are to express when being admitted to this ministry their agreement with the doctrine confessed and taught by the church and are to promise to labour in keeping

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with this confessing by means of the form of subscription adopted for that purpose. Refusal to do so implies no admission to the ministry.

The first admission vow or question at public profession of faith could be revised to read as follows:

First, do you accept the Old and the New Testaments as the only Word of God and hold fast to its teachings, which are confessed and taught here in this Christian Church, as the complete doctrine of salvation? Do you promise to abide by this doctrine through God's grace in life and death?

The ordination vows could be revised to read as follows:

First, do you feel in your heart that God Himself, through His congregation, has called you to this holy office/ministry?

Second, do you accept the Old and the New Testaments as the only Word of God and hold fast to its teachings, which are confessed and taught here in this Christian Church, as the complete doctrine of salvation? Do you promise to promote and defend this doctrine and do you reject all that conflicts with it, in keeping with your office/ministry?

Third, do you promise faithfully to discharge the duties of your office/ministry and to adorn the doctrine of God with a godly life?

Fourth, do you also promise to abide by the adopted Church Order and further ecclesiastical regulations and to submit to the discipline of the church in case you should become delinquent in doctrine or life?⁹⁵⁴

The form of subscription could be phrased as follows, building on the text in 3.4.4.5:

We, the undersigned, [task: ministers/professors in theology] in the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, acknowledge the Ecumenical Creeds and the Three Forms of Unity as well as the doctrinal sections of the liturgical forms of the said GKN to be in their substance fully in agreement with God's Holy Word, the only rule for life and faith. We hold that these confessions and documents serve adequately for the instruction in and defence of that Word. We consider them a testimony of our faith and they will serve as a guideline for our official ministry.

We promise therefore diligently to promote and faithfully to defend the doctrine confessed by the church without ever intentionally deviating from its substance and always in an endeavour to further the unity, sanctity, catholicity, and apostolicity of the church, all this in keeping with our office and calling.

We further promise to abide by the Church Order and associated regulations in effect in the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland.

Should we become otherwise convinced, or be considered to have become otherwise

We, the undersigned, [task: ministers/professors in theology] in the [name of the association of churches], acknowledge the Confessional Standard of the [name of the association of churches] to be in its substance fully in agreement with God's Holy Word, the only rule for life and faith. We hold that this standard and those derived from it serve adequately for the instruction in and defence of that Word. We consider it a testimony of our faith and it will serve as a guideline for our official ministry.

We promise therefore diligently to promote and faithfully to defend the doctrine confessed by the church without ever intentionally deviating from its substance and always in an endeavour to further the unity, sanctity, catholicity, and apostolicity of the church, all this in keeping with our office and calling.

We further promise to abide by the Church Order and associated regulations in effect in the [name of the association of churches].

Should we become otherwise convinced, or be considered to have become otherwise convinced, we will follow the stipulations

⁹⁵⁴ The term office is to be used in the case of ministers, elders and deacons, the term ministry in the case of church labourers.

convinced, we will follow the stipulations and co-operate in the procedures laid out in the Church Order with respect to such situations.

and co-operate in the procedures laid out in the Church Order with respect to such situations.

The declaration issued by the general synod might be worded as follows:⁹⁵⁵

The general synod of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland declares

That the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland hold fast the infallibility and absolute authority of God's Word as only rule for life and faith, as brought to expression in the Ecumenical Creeds and the Three Forms of Unity.

As the most general assembly of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, we readily testify, that we heartily feel and believe, that the Ecumenical Creeds and the Three Forms of Unity are in its substance fully in agreement with God's Holy Word. As churches we promise therefore diligently to promote and faithfully to defend the doctrine confessed by the church without ever intentionally deviating from its substance and always in an endeavour to further the unity, sanctity, catholicity, and apostolicity of the church. We heartily welcome into our ecclesiastical community all those who share this faith with us.

May the King of the Church work and increase this faith in the hearts of many, and may those, who with us have received a dear faith, display the grace shown to them in the practice of communion, to the glory of Him, who prayed that all those who are His might be one.

The general synod of the [name of the association of churches] declares

That the [name of the association of churches] holds fast the infallibility and absolute authority of God's Word as only rule for life and faith, as brought to expression in her Confessional Standard.

As the most general assembly of the [name of the association of churches], we readily testify, that we heartily feel and believe, that the Confessional Standard, is in its substance fully in agreement with God's Holy Word. As church we promise therefore diligently to promote and faithfully to defend the doctrine confessed by the church without ever intentionally deviating from its substance and always in an endeavour to further the unity, sanctity, catholicity, and apostolicity of the church. We heartily welcome into our ecclesiastical community all those who share this faith with us.

May the King of the Church work and increase this faith in the hearts of many, and may those, who with us have received a dear faith, display the grace shown to them in the practice of communion, to the glory of Him, who prayed that all those who are His might be one.

3.4.8 ONCE SUBSCRIBED

This final section deals with the processes in place once one has subscribed. What does subscription imply with respect to one's activity in the church? What effect does it have on the exercise of office? First, I will review several concepts that relate to processes after subscription (3.4.8.1). This creates an apparatus by which to name certain processes. One of the big issues is how a doctrine might be discussed, and when the boundaries of subscription are transgressed (3.4.8.2-3). Another issue is who actually guards the boundaries of confessional subscription (3.4.8.4). Whenever a person is consciously opposed to something in the confession, what should then happen (3.4.8.5)? As with the preceding subsection, in conclusion I will propose some texts to be placed in a church order (3.4.8.6).

3.4.8.1 TERMINOLOGY

A custom is worthless if not practised, and a law is ineffectual if not enforced. Thus, subscription is meaningless if it has no consequences and is not maintained. In the process of maintaining

⁹⁵⁵ This proposal is modelled on that of the Seceders in 1854.

subscription, there are processes indicated by technical concepts. In this subsection, I will define four central ones: doctrinal discipline, *gravamen*, suspension, and deposition. I will also briefly outline how these function in traditional Dortian polity.

In ecclesiastical circles, the term ‘discipline’ refers to the procedure for admonishing a member of the church for living as one may expect of a believer. This discipline can relate to one’s lifestyle or one’s convictions, reflecting the pair ‘walk and talk’. With respect to confessional subscription, discipline takes the form of **doctrinal discipline** (in Dutch: ‘*leertucht*’). Doctrinal discipline applies in particular to those who have the duty to instruct or lead members of the church. As such, it is generally (though not exclusively) applied in Dutch Reformed circles to the office bearers of the church.

The Latin term *gravamen* (plural *gravamina*) has been employed in the English language to indicate a formal complaint. It has now become obsolete. In Dutch, the term has come to indicate an objection of the most serious kind against a confession. Under Dortian polity, those who are no longer convinced of the correctness of the substance of a confession on a particular article or point of doctrine have the right—some believe, duty—to submit their doubts to the church for consideration. Thus a *gravamen* is basically a serious objection against a point of doctrine in a confession, and a request for a confession to be amended with respect to this matter.

Should an office bearer be found guilty of confessional unfaithfulness, he will generally be immediately forbidden by the church council to exercise the rights and duties of his office. This is known in Dutch polity as **suspension**. Traditionally, suspension is for a limited period of time. During this period, the office bearer is given time to reconsider his standpoint. Suspension is also applied if there are serious doubts concerning the office bearer’s confessional faithfulness, though there has not yet been a conviction. An office bearer may then be forbidden to exercise part of his office. Thus a minister may be forbidden to preach, but allowed to do pastoral work. The first form of suspension is a disciplinary measure, the second is not. Because of this possible ambiguity, I will refer in what follows to the first as suspension and the second as ‘temporary release from the exercise of office’. Prior to the suspension, the neighbouring church council is also to consider the situation. The church councils of the officer-in-question’s church and the neighbour church decide whether an office-bearer should be suspended. The next step is to consider whether the office bearer should be **deposed**. In the case of an elder or deacon, this decision is taken by the council of his own church and the neighbouring church. In the case of a minister, this decision is taken by the classis.

3.4.8.2 CONFESSED DOCTRINE IN DISCUSSION

FS-1619 seems very strict when it comes to the possibility of discussing doctrine fixed in a confession. It prescribes:

We promise therefore diligently to teach and faithfully to defend aforementioned doctrine without publicly or privately, directly or indirectly teaching or writing anything against this doctrine. ... And if at some later time it should happen that we foster any different consideration or sentiment against aforementioned doctrine, we promise that we will neither publicly nor privately propose, drive, preach, or write such a view, but we will first reveal this view to the consistory, the classis and the synod so that it may be examined.

Taken very literally, this would quash any discussion of confessional materials except in ecclesiastical assemblies. In theory this approach is practicable, certainly if ecclesiastical assemblies meet very frequently and the discussion of the confessions is made a fixed point of the agenda. However, this is not how it works in practice. Moreover, in order fully to appropriate confessional doctrine, one will have to discuss it, and in order to develop doctrine, mistakes will certainly be made. If the church is to grow in its confessing, there must not only be room to change or augment the substance of its confessing, there must also be a workable system to do so. This tension has frequently been felt in the course of history.

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The context in which this problem is most keenly felt is that of theological academia. In the nineteenth century, there were already serious debates on the distinction between ‘scientific theology’ and ‘ecclesiastical theology’ (cf. e.g. 2.6.2.3-4, 2.8.2.10, 2.14.2.2). Some felt that those serving the public should indeed be bound to the confessing to the church, but that within the confines of academia, theologians should be free. In orthodox reformed circles, the practice has always been to have professors and lecturers in theology subscribe the confessions also. In 1854, the CAGK, because of a conflict, bound professors in their teaching not only to confessions, but even to certain theological works (2.7.2.12.3); however, this was an incidental measure.

In the GKN(v)—where ministers are academically highly trained—there exists a closed forum in which ministers may debate issues with each other. This forum has the form of a magazine that is subjected to such strict copyright that quotation from it in writings other than those published in the magazine itself is not permitted. It gives theologians the chance to make mistakes without endangering the faith life of the less-informed. It is also a practice to organize closed meetings of ministers⁹⁵⁶ at which debates may take place in person. It should be pointed out, however, that such discussions are not regulated in the church order, and do not have ecclesiastical status.

In 1971, the GKN[s] deputies ‘confessing’ (in whose midst Weijland played an essential role) pleaded for some form of theological laboratory where experiments might take place and mistakes might be made without further consequence (2.12.2.7.4). In 1977, it was determined that the theological universities could not serve as such laboratories. However, by qualifying aspects of subscription with terms such as ‘weighty’, ‘obviously’ and ‘unacceptable’, deputies in fact made the ecclesiastical assemblies the laboratory asked for (2.12.2.7.6). In practice, it meant that someone whose convictions and teachings were considered doubtful entered a discussion with a body thereto appointed. In practice, the few discussions held thus, such as those with Wiersinga, have proven endless (cf. 2.12.2.7.7).

The critical point is that subscription seeks to preserve the unity, catholicity, sanctity, and apostolicity of the church. It is a measure that especially wishes to protect the church membership against false doctrine. I believe there should indeed be more room within the scope of subscription to discuss and debate the substance of the church’s confessing. Before having the matters discussed at ecclesiastical assemblies, there should be a forum where such discussions might be had without affecting the church membership. For, as things are presently practised, discussion of doctrinal matters is a public event at ecclesiastical assemblies and involves not only trained ministers but also untrained elders. Further, in such a forum, errors can be made in good faith. Doctrinal discipline has a tendency to work from a minor to a major conclusion (e.g. acceptance of the framework hypothesis is construed to be a form of intentional higher criticism). In a closed discussion forum, such points can be considered before the issue becomes more public and thereby detrimental. From this perspective, the approach as practised in the GKN(v)—a magazine with a closed membership and strict copyright regulations, a coetus—and in our modern time, a closed internet forum—could serve this purpose. Although I do not believe it is necessary to regulate such discussions explicitly via a church order, I do think that the church should recognize the existence of such instruments for debate. FS-1619 would seem to preclude this when it states: “We promise therefore diligently to teach and faithfully to defend aforementioned doctrine without publicly or *privately*, directly or indirectly teaching or writing anything against this doctrine. [emphasis mine, RCJ].”

Such secret discussions could, of course, raise doubts concerning the orthodoxy and good intentions of those who partake in them. Dutch society is a very open society, with much aversion

⁹⁵⁶ These meetings are often called a coetus, but are not to be confused with the coetus of the sixteenth century, in some aspects a forerunner of the classis.

to ‘backroom discussions’.⁹⁵⁷ However, such doubts would be misplaced, since subscription to the confessions by the participants is adequate proof of the good intentions of those participating in such closed discussions.

3.4.8.3 TRANSGRESSION OF THE BOUNDARY

It will be clear from the foregoing that not every expression of an objection to confessional substance is worthy of discipline. This raises the question, when *is* the boundary of confessional binding transgressed?

I believe there are two factors that require consideration.

The first is, what are the intentions of the person who is substantively transgressing the boundary of the confession? Is he intentionally confessing something contrary to the commonly adopted confession? Or was it the result of carelessness or ignorance? No one is perfect, not in teaching either (James 3:2). A person may err in good faith and with the best of intentions. His error may be pointed out, but such an error itself does not warrant deposition. Not sin, but hardening in sin is punishable. Only if the subscriber adamantly maintains that he has not erred has he transgressed the boundary.

There is, however, a second factor. A person may err in good faith and with the best of intentions, but his actions may be considered detrimental or injurious to the church. It is also necessary to take note of the environment in which the transgression took or is taking place. Who does it reach? Only colleagues in office? Only members of an ecclesiastical assembly? Covenant youth being catechized? People from outside the church? Has it been published or broadcast so that the audience cannot be described? The name of the church and the faith of its members ought not to be placed at risk by the actions of those serving it in any capacity.

Thus I come to the following two situations, either one being sufficient on its own to mark a person as a ‘transgressor of confessional faithfulness’.

1. When a person intentionally confesses something contrary to the commonly adopted confession
2. When a person, intentionally or unintentionally, confesses something contrary to the commonly adopted confession in an environment where or in a way that dishonours the name of the church and/or confuses its members⁹⁵⁸

I point out that the concept ‘to confess’ implies a particular form of communication. A person might be convinced of something contrary to the commonly adopted confession. A person might even, on the basis of such convictions, ask questions about the correctness of the confession on this issue. However, in these cases, the person is not intentionally *confessing* something contrary to the commonly adopted confession. By ‘confessing’ I understand the deliberate statement of one’s convictions, considered justified and not requiring correction.

The concept ‘contrary’ should also be taken in a very strict, even inimical sense. One may not be convinced of the confession on a particular point, yet accept that the confession might well be right on it. One may confess one’s own conviction but, provided one at the same time indicates that the confession may be right, this need not be considered to be *contrary* to the confession.

I point out that ‘confess’ does not here imply ‘teach’. My point is, it is often said that one may hold a conviction as long as one does not teach it. To my way of thinking, it is a binding of the conscience if one may hold a conviction but not articulate it.

⁹⁵⁷ Towards the end of 2005 a by-invite-only meeting was held for leading persons in the GKN(v). The fact that this meeting was by-invite-only raised quite some eyebrows among church members. See Van Bekkum, "Blij met de Kerk?"

⁹⁵⁸ These two are similar to the criteria adopted by the GKN[s] in FS-1979: “should the ecclesiastical assembly come to the judgement that with respect to any weighty point of doctrine we obviously contradict Holy Scripture and thus harm in a for it unacceptable manner the unity of the faith and confessing...”

In 1977-79, the GKN[s] introduced into its form of subscription the qualifications “should the ecclesiastical assembly come to the judgment that with respect to any weighty point of doctrine we obviously contradict Holy Scripture and thus harm in an unacceptable manner the unity of the faith and confessing.” (2.12.2.7.6) A problem here is that the qualifiers are vague, there are no standards by which to judge. This approach further seems to emphasize the horizontal element in ecclesiastical subscription. While it is true that a transgression only takes place when Holy Scripture is obviously contradicted, the decision mentions only its effect for the unity of the faith and confessing, and it fails to mention its effect on the proclamation of divine truth. One might argue that ‘confessing’ includes the concept of proclamation. I would counter, however, that the use of the term ‘confessing’ emphasizes the human aspect in the proclamation and almost dispenses with the divine element. One needs a lot of goodwill to read this statement positively. In practice, this approach has meant that no one has ever been found guilty of this, not even Kuitert in his most obvious contradiction of Holy Scripture.

My conditions are nevertheless very similar to those of the GKN[s]. A difference is that I have two conditions while the GKN[s] made them one (note the word ‘thus’). My approach does not allow for a situation of ‘compliance’ instead of ‘appropriation’, as the GKN[s] approach does. Further, my second condition is broader than the GKN[s] since I also consider harm caused to the church unintentionally worthy of discipline. I can appreciate that one wants to protect the office bearer, but this should not be at the expense of the church.

3.4.8.4 THE GUARDS

During the nineteenth century, the debate centred in part on the question of the medical way or the juridical way of enforcing subscription. There were those who argued that a person’s own conscience was to enforce subscription (Groningers, Ethicals, Medical Calvinists), while others argued that the church had to do this by means of its assemblies (Apologists, Juridical Calvinists, Traditionalists). In general, those advocating the juridical approach did not consider the two approaches mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, even within juridical circles the balance between the two was—and still is—a point of dispute.

Van der Dussen’s imagery of a ship sailing between the buoys and sometimes sailing around the buoys is very apt (2.14.2.8). The question he does not tackle is who decides whether movement beyond the buoys is warranted. In the case of shipping, it tends to be the captain of the ship. If the imagery of aeroplanes following flight paths were used, the answer to who decides whether movement outside the flight path would be the control tower. The image itself cannot help us here.

FS-1619 assumes that the first guard is the conscience of the person. For FS-1619 considers first of all the possibility that a subscriber becomes otherwise convinced. In this situation, the subscriber promises to make his changed convictions known to the ecclesiastical assemblies. Such a person could then do so purely because of his own conscience.

However, having one’s personal conscience alone as a guard is insufficient. Groen van Prinsterer adequately proved this in his noble polemics with Gunning jr. (2.8.2.8). The Zaalberg and Meyboom cases make clear that the conscience of someone who thinks differently will also come to conclusions different from those who hold the confessing of the church (2.7.2.9). The *church* confesses. Thus, the *church* also guards its confessing. Given that the church acts via its various assemblies, ecclesiastical assemblies have the duty to maintain the confessing of the church.

This raises the question: which assembly or assemblies? I believe the first responsibility lies with the local church council.⁹⁵⁹ It is primarily the place where the church teaches and preaches. The office bearers who act in this context logically have the first responsibility. However, there is often insufficient expertise in the congregation to judge matters adequately. Thus it is not wise, as current practice has it, to involve the neighbouring church council. Moreover, in a situation of possible doctrinal discipline, a measure of independence is required. Hence, it is appropriate that the classis be involved right from the start. To ensure sufficient expertise, it is advisable that the

⁹⁵⁹ I hold this in spite of the fact that the church council was not accorded a role in doctrinal discipline until GS Dordrecht 1618-19 (see Fanoy, "Ondertekeningformulier", 592).

classis be served by a committee of wise men, be it deputies from the regional synod or a standing committee theology, as it functions for example in the PKN; the latter has my preference.

I therefore concur with J. Kamphuis who attempts to walk the path between collegialism and independentism in contrast with G. Goossens, who has argued strongly in favour of the lone responsibility of the local church (2.14.2.1.2). This is still a primary distinction between the GKN(v) and the NGK today.

The situation could be that a minister asks the church council whether a particular conviction requires the submission of a *gravamen*, and his church council decides that it does not while other local churches believe that it ought. The question at this stage is who gets this ball rolling within the church beyond the local church council. It would seem proper if the church, when asked to judge a doctrinal matter, seek the advice of classis, mainly because a classis is in a better position to judge the question substantively. Furthermore, a minister has also subscribed the confessions in the context of association of churches, and the classis is the first representative of this association (cf. 3.4.7.7). Finally, those tending towards connectionalism will assign more responsibility to the broader assembly than those tending towards autonomism (cf. 3.1.1.3.4.2.2). In cases relating to doctrine, I personally believe that major assemblies—certainly the classis—should be involved more: in the New Testament, discussions of doctrine always rose above the local church (e.g. Acts 15 and 1 Cor. 7:17).

During the 1960s, Telder received the support of his consistory in Breda. It was not until the churches of Hoogeveen and Bedum asked the classis to which Breda belonged that a doctrinal case came into being (2.14.2.1.1).

In Presbyterian circles, doctrine is always a matter for the presbytery, never for the session. Within Dortian polity, however, it would be improper to bypass the church council. Moreover, it would be at odds with the priesthood of all believers to keep local congregations entirely outside doctrinal debates.

May a broader assembly also exercise discipline? I have already discussed the principles underlying this matter, the doctrines of autonomism and connectionalism (3.1.1.3.4.2.2). The practical effects of the choice one makes are quite drastic. The broader assemblies of the GKN(v), which practise autonomism, decided during the 1960s that churches with councils that refused to abide by the decisions of broader assemblies had thereby placed themselves outside the association. The basic argument is that a broader assembly has no official—in the sense of ‘with respect to office’—authority, only the church council does.

In its effect, the approach of the GKN(v) is rather drastic: it places whole churches with their whole membership outside the association of churches and beyond the horizon of brothers and sisters. This stands in contrast with how GS Dordrecht 1618-19 acted with respect to the Remonstrants. Those actively teaching Arminianism were disciplined; those holding Arminian views but willing to be taught in the matter, or doing so out of ignorance, were dealt with more leniently.

Essentially, the matter will be decided by whether one chooses ‘autonomism’ or ‘connectionalism’. I point out that, in principle, connectionalism is not contrary to the Three Forms of Unity, for the Three Forms of Unity do not make a statement on the issue. I further believe that connectionalism has more going for it, both from a Scriptural and from a practical perspective, than autonomism. Hence I believe disciplinary power with respect to doctrine should be granted also to broader assemblies.

3.4.8.5 GRAVAMINA AND DOCTRINAL DISCIPLINE

What happens when someone holds opinions that do not accord with the confessing of the church? That is the subject matter of this last subsection. There are two possibilities. Firstly, a person himself admits to holding views not in accord with the church’s confessing. He will then submit a *gravamen* (3.4.8.5.1). Secondly, another may suspect a person of holding views not in accord with the church’s confessing. He will then initiate a doctrinal discipline procedure (3.4.8.5.2). There is much discontent with the procedure followed by the churches in dealing with doctrinal cases. The NHK and GKN[s], and in their wake, the PKN, have explicitly inserted into

the procedure the stage of discussions. I believe other Reformed churches should follow this example (3.4.8.5.3). Those convicted should always have the right to appeal (3.4.8.5.4). Finally, there are questions regarding participation of office bearers suspected of confessional unfaithfulness in ecclesiastical assemblies. Do they have a right to silence and may they be a member of the very body judging their case (3.4.8.5.5)?

3.4.8.5.1 *Gravamina*

In his dissertation, Schokking describes three sorts of *gravamina*:

1. Queries: a person requests an ecclesiastical assembly to explain a matter;
2. Objections: a person submits an objection to an ecclesiastical assembly for decision;
3. Differences: an ecclesiastical assembly is asked to judge a doctrinal issue between two persons or bodies.

Of the above three, the second is commonly referred to as a *gravamen* today.

Schokking explains that there are very few concrete examples of *gravamina* beside the Remonstrant issue. He then ascribes the following duties to the person with objections and to the church:

Duties of the objector:

1. To reveal his objections in the most accurate words
2. To refrain from presenting himself as a self-appointed prophet
3. To refrain from spreading his personal convictions before communal approval

Duties of the church:

1. To examine the matter carefully
2. To judge the issue only according to God's Word⁹⁶⁰

Schokking had this published in 1902. Since then, one substantive *gravamen* has been upheld: that against BC art. 36. Why is that there have been so few *gravamina*, that there has been so little revision of the confessional heritage of the Reformed churches?

Some object to *gravamina*, considering them a sign of perfectionism (e.g. Berkhof, 2.11.2.4). Others hold that historic confessional documents should not be revised. There is merit to these stances. The idea behind *gravamina* is not so much to correct the confessing of the church as it is to specify more clearly which doctrine is to be considered binding and which not. I have already indicated that the extant confessions are not suited to such a juridical end. For *gravamina* to work properly, one would need a defining confession as outlined in 3.3.10.

A second problem with *gravamina* is that it is not entirely clear how and where they should be submitted. The *gravamen* against BC art. 36 began with the incident where Prof. F. L. Rutgers and other advisors to GS Middelburg 1896 indicated objections to a line in this article. It remained a point of dispute during the 1960s whether and how Telder should have submitted his position (on the intermediate state) to the churches for consideration (the debate Kamphuis-Goossens, 2.14.2.1.2). In light of what FS-1619 stipulates, I would argue that a *gravamen* should be submitted to the church council and to a general synod, via the church council and the so-called 'way of the church order' (i.e. approval of classis and regional synod).

However, where it concerns doctrinal matters, I believe more prominence should be given to the role of the classis than is customary today. Doctrine is a matter for the whole church, and the classis is the representative of the association of churches. I consider it practicable and wise that every classis have a standing committee 'doctrine'.⁹⁶¹ When a *gravamen* is considered by a church council, it could then do so in the first instance with the assistance of this standing committee. At this stage the issue is whether the *gravamen* is indeed substantially different from the confessions.

⁹⁶⁰ Schokking, *Leertucht*, 223-240.

⁹⁶¹ This standing committee could be the same as that for the examination of candidates.

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If the church council, with the advice of the standing committee, decides that it is, the *gravamen* should then be submitted to the classis to see whether the confession or the *gravamen* is in accord with Scripture. In doing so, the classis should be assisted by a number of experts appointed to this task by the general synod, akin to the PKN procedure, or else by deputies appointed by the regional synod.

If the *gravamen* is found to be contrary to Scripture, the person submitting it will be given a period of time during which to reconsider his views to the end of recanting or at least refraining from teaching his views. During this period the office bearer is suspended from office. If he does not recant or promise to refrain from teaching his views within the set period, he is deposed from office. If, however, the *gravamen* is considered in line with Scripture, the *gravamen* is submitted to general synod,⁹⁶² which reconsiders the issue to decide whether the confessions should be corrected. I point out that when a *gravamen* is sustained, it can mean no more than that the confession contained a *theologoumenon*. General synod could, of course, also decide that the *gravamen* is a *theologoumenon*.

Only if this is put into practice will one discover which possibilities exist.

The foregoing may be translated into the following church order text. In the left column I follow the more autonomist context of the GKN(v), in the right column a more connectionalist approach which I believe possible within the bounds of original Dortian polity.

C. Gravamen

Members and those serving in a ministry in the church who hold or come to hold convictions contrary to the doctrine confessed and taught by the church shall not promote their views in a way detrimental to the church and its membership. If such an objector does not refrain from teaching his views, he is to submit a gravamen to the churches for consideration and examination.

In first instance the church council will examine the gravamen with the advice of classis deputies to see whether the substance of the gravamen indeed is not in keeping with the confessing of the church.

If the gravamen is upheld as not being in keeping with the confessing of the church, the gravamen will be judged according to God's Holy Word by the church council with the advice of classis deputies.

If the church council finds the gravamen contrary to Scripture, the objector will be given time to reconsider his views to the end that he will recant his views or at least promise to refrain from teaching them. During this period the objector will be temporarily released from exercising his office. If he refuses to at least refrain from teaching his views he is deposed from office.

If the church council finds the confessions

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In first instance the church council will examine the gravamen with the advice of classis deputies to see whether the substance of the gravamen indeed is not in keeping with the confessing of the church.

If the gravamen is upheld as not being in keeping with the confessing of the church, the gravamen will be judged according to God's Holy Word by the classis with the advice of General Synod deputies.

If the classis finds the gravamen contrary to Scripture, the objector will be given time to reconsider his views to the end that he will recant his views or at least promise to refrain from teaching them. During this period the objector will be temporarily released from exercising his office. If he refuses to at least refrain from teaching his views he is deposed from office.

If the classis finds the confessions at fault,

⁹⁶² The current trend in Dutch Reformed churches is to do away with regional synods. With respect to doctrinal issues I believe such a removal can be justified.

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at fault, it will submit a gravamen to the general synod via the classis and regional synod.

G. Gravamen at Synod⁹⁶³

When General Synod receives a gravamen from one of the church councils via a classis and regional synod, it will determine whether the objections raised against the confession are justifiable.

If General Synod upholds the gravamen, it will submit its decision to all classes for consideration.

If at least 75% of the classes agree with the decision of General Synod, the procedure for amending the confession is followed. If between 50% and 75% of the classes agree with the decision of General Synod, the matter is reconsidered by the General Synod and the classes. If after this second consideration still less than 75% of the classes are in agreement, the gravamen is denied.

it will submit a gravamen to the general synod.

G. Gravamen at Synod

When General Synod receives a gravamen from one of the classes, it will determine whether the objections raised against the confession are justifiable.

If General Synod upholds the gravamen, it will submit its decision to all classes for consideration.

If at least 75% of the classes agree with the decision of General Synod, the procedure for amending the confession is followed. If between 50% and 75% of the classes agree with the decision of General Synod, the matter is reconsidered by the General Synod and the classes. If after this second consideration still less than 75% of the classes are in agreement, the gravamen is denied.

3.4.8.5.2 Doctrinal Discipline

A *gravamen* begins when an office bearer or church council submits to the church for consideration convictions that are at odds with the confessions. However, it is also possible that a person promotes convictions at odds with the confessions but does not submit them for consideration. Such a person might be doing so unintentionally, being unaware that his convictions are at odds with the confessions, or believing that they belong to the area of tolerance. He might also be doing so intentionally, being unwilling to have them judged because he believes he may be deposed from office.

Schokking considers this a *gravamen* of the sort ‘differences’.⁹⁶⁴ Today, such a case is referred to as a matter of doctrinal discipline; one may also speak of a charge of confessional unfaithfulness.

The historical review makes clear that many have challenged the right of the church to discipline, including with punishment, those who fail to abide by the confessing of the church in their own confessing and teaching. Ethicals and Medical Calvinists were especially opposed to such measures. At one stage, the terms ‘justicial’ and ‘judicial’ became popular to distinguish between a doctrinal declaration and a disciplinary measure, approving the first and rejecting the propriety of the second (2.12.2.7.4). It is clear, however, that Scripture approves of such discipline (e.g. Gal 1:6-9; 2 John :10).⁹⁶⁵ Further, to the extent that contractarian notions are in play, a church has the inalienable right to set and maintain confessional boundaries. I therefore believe doctrinal discipline to be justified.

⁹⁶³ This section is indicated with a ‘G’ since in the final church order article matters relating to doctrinal discipline, inquiry and appeal logically precede it.

⁹⁶⁴ Schokking, *Leertucht*, 230.

⁹⁶⁵ De Reuver argues that Gal. 1:6-9 does not justify discipline but admits that various texts in 1 and 2 John do, writing “for the author [of the Johannine] epistles the *status confessionis* is at stake.” (De Reuver, *Eén Kerk in Meervoud*, 119, 125-126).

Someone who has subscribed but is considered unfaithful will be accused of confessional unfaithfulness. The road that is subsequently followed is very unclear. All manner of practice exists, and it often happens that procedural mistakes are made in the course of doctrinal cases.⁹⁶⁶ I therefore refrain from describing the current practice and turn to describing the practice I believe best suits the Dortian polity model.

Someone who doubts the confessional faithfulness of an office bearer has the right to bring charges against that office bearer. Accusations against office bearers serving in a local ministry should only be allowed to be brought by members of the local church; accusations against office bearers serving in a ministry beyond the local charge may be brought by any member of the association of churches.

The accused will submit his accusations to the church council that supervises the ministry of the accused. In the first instance, the church council will see whether the accusations hold true, namely that the teachings of the accused are indeed his teachings, and that they are not indeed in accordance with the doctrine confessed by the church. For such a decision, expertise in the doctrine of the church is required. Hence it is advisable to involve deputies appointed by classis for this end.

It is possible that the accuser and the accused are not members of the same local church. If the church council supervising the ministry of the accused does not uphold the charges brought by the accuser, the accuser may turn to his own church council. That church council will look at the charges and the decision of the church council supervising the ministry of the accused. If the church council of the church to which the accused belongs disagrees with the decision of the church council supervising the ministry of the accused, the former may submit the accusations to the classis to which the latter belongs. It should always be remembered that broader ecclesiastical assemblies are assemblies of churches, not of persons. Individuals ought only to be allowed to address broader assemblies if they are appealing a decision in the sense of CO-1619 art. 31.

If the charges are upheld by the church council supervising the ministry of the accused, his views may be considered a *gravamen*. The procedure for dealing with *gravamina* may then be followed.

This is the procedure that I believe would work best in the current circumstances. There are no differences in approach between the autonomist and connectionalist approach here. The approach may be articulated in a church order as follows.

D. Charges of Confessional Unfaithfulness

Charges of confessional unfaithfulness may be brought against those serving in a ministry in the church. Charges against those serving locally may only be brought by members of the same local church. Charges against those serving beyond the local church may only be brought by members of the [name of the association of churches].

When objections arise against the confessional faithfulness of someone serving in a ministry, the objector shall submit his objections to the church council that has supervision over the person's ministry.

⁹⁶⁶ Two examples.

1. Rev. Berkhoff was seated by the CGKN synod 1933; Rev. van Hulst was not seated by the synod of the Free Reformed Churches in Australia (daughter church of the GKN(v)) in 1998. Both were suspected of confessional unfaithfulness.

2. I was asked in 2005 to give expert advice in the following case. Br. A from church X submitted an objection to Rev. B from church Y. Churches X and Y belong respectively to Classes V and W, and classes V and W belong respectively to Regional Synods T and U. Church Y denied the submission on substantive grounds. Br. A then appealed this decision to Classis W. Classis W denied the appeal on substantive grounds. Br. A then appealed this decision to Regional Synod U. It was at this point that I was asked for my opinion. I (and others) advised (and Regional Synod U decided) to deny the appeal on procedural grounds: br. A should be addressing the issue via his own church and both Church Y and Classis W should have denied the appeal on procedural grounds. If Church X were to sustain his objections to Rev. B, church X could then raise the issue with church Y.

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If that church council, with the advice of classis deputies, upholds the objections, it shall request the accused to cease promoting his views in a way detrimental to the church and its membership. If the accused refuses to do so, his views shall be dealt with as a gravamen.

If, however, that church council, with the advice of classis deputies, does not uphold the objections, and the objector himself is not a member of the church in which the accused serves, the objector may submit his objections to his own church council together with the defence of the church council supervising the ministry of the accused.

Should the church council holding supervision over the objector, with the advice of classis deputies, come to a different conclusion from that of the church council supervising the ministry of the accused, the church council holding supervision over the objector shall submit its findings to the classis to which the church council supervising the ministry of the accused belongs.

The classis will then deal with this submission as if it were an appeal against the decision of the church council supervising the ministry of the accused.

(In the case of professors in theology, the term ‘church council’ is to be replaced with ‘board of governors’ and ‘classis’ with ‘General Synod’.)

3.4.8.5.3 Discussions

However, there is good reason to think even more broadly about refining the process followed in considering *gravamina* or a doctrinal case. Both the NHK and the GKN[s]—and hence the PKN today—have explicitly added a period of discussion to the system prescribed by GS Dordrecht 1618-19. A strict reading of the procedure of GS Dordrecht 1618-19 implies that the issue is whether someone has acted against the confession. The point, however, should not be whether someone has done so—let him who is without sin cast the first stone—but whether someone *persists* in doing so. There is, however, no clear procedure within the polity of GS Dordrecht 1618-19 to ascertain this. The ecclesiastical assembly is required to *decide* the issue.

I believe that Reformed churches practising Dortian polity would do well explicitly to adopt the PKN structure and insert a period of discussion with the ‘accused’ to define what the issues are. One might even see this period of discussion as an attempt at mediation prior to having the issue decided. This discussion should take place when someone’s convictions have been found to be contrary to the confessions, and are to be judged according to God’s Holy Word. In other words, the discussion is to take place when the matter is before the classis. The classis should then initiate such a discussion before deciding the issue.

The matter may be articulated in a church order as follows:

E. Inquiry

In relation to a gravamen, charges of confessional unfaithfulness, or for other well-founded reasons, an ecclesiastical assembly may conduct an inquiry into the convictions of an office bearer.

The ecclesiastical assembly will ensure that it fully hears the office bearer(s) in question. Office bearers are to co-operate fully and openly in such an inquiry. Those who refuse to co-operate are to be deposed from their ministry.

3.4.8.5.4 Appeal

There is lack of clarity concerning the duties of the suspended or deposed subscriber during the course of appeal. FS-1619 stipulated, “during which appeal we will acquiesce in the judgement and determination of the provincial synod.” FS-2001 (CGKN) continues to state so, but FS-1978 (GKN(v)) states, “during the time of the appeal we shall conduct ourselves according to the decision of the minor assembly.” The background to the former stipulation is that the provincial or regional synod is the first body to which one can appeal the decision of a classis. It is a common practice in law that a person, convicted both originally and in appeal, complies with the decision taken, reserving the right to a second appeal. This lies behind the stipulations of FS-1619: a

minister can be convicted by the classis and in appeal by the regional synod. He then holds the right to appeal to the general synod. But in running that appeal, he is to comply with the decision of the regional synod.

The change in the GKN(v) probably relates to the fact that ministers sign the form of subscription also at the local level. The underlying intention could be understood to be the same as that of FS-1619. However, the wording does not bring this clearly to the fore. For the church council also belongs to the minor assembly. A strict reading of FS-1978 could thus be understood to say that prior to an appeal a convicted person must abide by the decision taken.

*Fanoy believes the stipulation is to be understood as follows. If a minister refuses to reveal his convictions but appeals to a national synod and a church council, or classis *ipso facto* suspends him, the provincial synod is to decide whether or not the minister is indeed to be suspended.⁹⁶⁷ This reading puzzles me and seems very illogical to me. How can a minister who refuses to be examined with respect to his convictions appeal directly to a national synod? First of all, there is no decision to appeal against. Secondly, does not subscription imply that one reveals one's convictions to any ecclesiastical assembly? I therefore do not consider Fanoy's reading plausible.*

It makes sense to state explicitly in the church order that after a first appeal a person has the right to a second appeal but yet is to abide by the decision taken. This is wise in view of CO-1619 art. 31, which states that decisions of a major assembly are to be considered binding unless they are proven to be contrary to God's Word or the church order. It is not uncommon in doctrinal discipline cases for appellants to believe themselves to be in accord with God's Word, and therefore to refuse to acknowledge their deposition. However, such an understanding is incorrect. The regional synod in the case of ministers and the classis in the case of elders and deacons takes a formal decision: because a person is in breach of the confession and promotes teachings contrary to Scripture, the person may no longer act in an official capacity within the church. An ecclesiastical assembly has the right to take such a decision. Should the general synod or the regional synod uphold the appeal, the office bearer will have suffered for doing good, like the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Pet. 3:17).

Translating the foregoing into a stipulation implies choosing between a more autonomist and a more connectionalist approach. The current autonomist practice in the GKN(v) implies that a conviction of confessional and Scriptural unfaithfulness is taken by the church council, although I have proposed the involvement of classis deputies rather than the neighbouring church. The more connectionalist approach that I myself advocate would see 'confessional faithfulness' as a matter judged by the church council with the involvement of classis deputies, but 'Scriptural faithfulness' as a matter judged by the classis. It means that in the autonomist system, the first court of appeal will be the classis and the second court of appeal the regional synod, whereas in the connectionalist system, the first court of appeal will be the regional synod (to this end I believe regional synods should continue to exist) and the second court of appeal the general synod.

An important point is that during the first appeal, the decision being appealed is stayed. If, however, the first appeal is denied, the initial decision ought to be executed, even if the convicted person initiates a second appeal. Beyond the second appeal, the most one can do is request a revision, which would imply looking at how the appeal was dealt with and possibly ordering a retrial. I do not believe there should be opportunities for a third or even a fourth appeal. If someone is convicted and this conviction is upheld in two appeals, the convicted may leave the matter in the hands of the ultimate judge, the Lord of the church, Jesus Christ.

In the GKN(v), the fact that the church council takes the initial decision and there are four ecclesiastical assemblies has meant that there is in fact the possibility of three appeals. Corrective measures are, however, being taken, to curtail such 'endless appealing'.

The following text might regulate this matter. In the left column I describe the more autonomist approach, in the right column a more connectionalist approach.

⁹⁶⁷ Fanoy, "Ondertekeningformulier", 596

F. Appeal

Those convicted by the church council of confessional and Scriptural unfaithfulness and therefore deposed have the right of appeal to the classis. During the course of this appeal the decision of the church council is stayed and the convicted office bearer is suspended from office.

If the classis denies the appeal, the decision of the church council is executed. The convicted office bearer has the right of appeal to the regional synod. During this appeal he shall abide by the decision of the church council, upheld by the classis.

F. Appeal

Those convicted by the church council of confessional unfaithfulness and by the classis of Scriptural unfaithfulness and therefore deposed have the right of appeal to the regional synod. During the course of this appeal the decision of the classis is stayed and the convicted office bearer is suspended from office.

If the regional synod denies the appeal, the decision of the classis is executed. The convicted office bearer has the right of appeal to the general synod. During this appeal he shall abide by the decision of the classis, upheld by the regional synod.

3.4.8.5.5 Participation in Ecclesiastical Assemblies

It is not clear whether a person whose confessional faithfulness has been drawn into question can be a member of the adjudicating body. Dutch law determines that judges may not adjudicate cases in which they are personally involved, or could be conceived to be personally involved. This general principle of law should, I believe, also apply in ecclesiastical cases. He whose confessional faithfulness is being drawn into question should not be a functioning member of the ecclesiastical assembly adjudicating the matter. It need not imply, however, that such a person may not be a member of the assembly at all. I take it to be obvious that a person suspended from office cannot be a member of an ecclesiastical assembly.

The Remonstrant troubles taught the Dutch churches the hard lesson that those suspected of confessional unfaithfulness could prove unwilling to participate in investigations into their views. Under Dutch law, there exists a right to silence. However, since the doctrine of Scripture as confessed by the church weighs more heavily than one's personal honour, in cases of doctrinal discipline there ought to be no right to silence. FS-1619 and related forms therefore stipulated:

But if the consistory, classis or synod should ever on account of serious reasons for second thoughts, in order to preserve the unity and sincerity of doctrine, would wish to ask of us that we explain more fully our opinion [about some article of this Confession, Catechism or Synodical declaration], we promise also always by this, to be ready and willing to respond to such a request at all times, ...

The church order should therefore include a stipulation of this nature.

3.4.8.5.6 Doctrinal Supervision over Those not Serving the Church in an Official Capacity

There is a qualitative difference between those serving the church in an official capacity, whether as office bearer or church labourer, and those who are not. The Reformed confess that those who are delinquent in doctrine or life are worthy of discipline (HC LD 31). However, there are doctrines that, though confessed by the church, do not belong to the set of doctrines most fundamental in Scripture. In the wake of GS Dordrecht 1618-19, a distinction was made between those actively teaching Arminianism and those holding its views but not promoting them. GS Den Haag 1914 of the GKN further determined that someone who cannot fully subscribe the confessions cannot serve in office, but is not necessarily to be excluded from the Lord's Supper.⁹⁶⁸ On the other hand, public profession of faith includes an acknowledgement of the confessing of the church, and such profession makes the way open to celebration of the Lord's Supper. How is this problem to be resolved?

⁹⁶⁸ Acta...GKN... 1914, art. 138 and bijl. XCVII.

Systematic Part

Schokking writes that PS Leiden 1619, when asked how one should deal with Remonstrants, determined the following:

1. Teachers of Arminianism
 - a. Those who harden in teaching ought to be disciplined
 - b. Those open to debate may return to their ministry after a period of time under certain conditions
 - c. Those who confess their guilt may, after a year, be called elsewhere
2. Those who are or have been office bearers among the Remonstrants
 - a. Those who harden themselves should be deposed but not excommunicated
 - b. For reconciliation with the church, confession of guilt is required
3. Other church members
 - a. Those who harden in sin shall be admonished but not excommunicated until the next Provincial Synod can review the matter
 - b. The simple are to be instructed and ought to keep their silence.

Schokking comments that these guidelines were practical. He has found it impossible to research whether these rules were followed. In closing, he points out that the church council still played an important role: it had to decide whether someone was hardening in sin or proving to be teachable.⁹⁶⁹

I have previously concluded that there are two factors that determine whether someone has transgressed the boundaries of confessing. These are:

1. When a person intentionally confesses something contrary to the commonly adopted confession
2. When a person, intentionally or unintentionally, confesses something contrary to the commonly adopted confession in an environment where or in a way which dishonours the name of the church and/or confuses its members

The second can never apply to those not serving the church in an official capacity. For the opinions and actions of non-office bearers ought not to be linked to the name of the church. For example, the Canons of Dort state in their conclusion:

Therefore, this Synod of Dort adjures, in the Name of the Lord, all who piously call upon our Saviour Jesus Christ not to judge the faith of the Reformed churches from the slander gathered from here and there. Neither are they to judge from personal statements of some ancient or modern teachers, often quoted in bad faith, or taken out of context and explained contrary to their meaning. But one ought to judge the faith of the reformed churches from the public confessions of these churches themselves and from the present explanation of the orthodox doctrine, confirmed by the unanimous consent of the members of the entire Synod, one and all.⁹⁷⁰

Further, one must realize that the sanction applied to confessional unfaithfulness for office bearers is suspension and deposition, not excommunication. Church members cannot be suspended or deposed from office since they have no office.

The question is thus more extreme: can someone be excommunicated, removed from the communion of saints, for holding a particular doctrine? CO-1619 is clear on this, stating in article 72 that someone sinning against the purity of “doctrine or godliness of life” is subject to discipline. For example, someone adamantly and consistently denying the human nature of Jesus Christ ought to be excommunicated (2 John :7,10).

⁹⁶⁹ Schokking, *Leertucht*, 263-264.

⁹⁷⁰ Translation of the Canadian Reformed Churches. See Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:596.

In the exercise of discipline, the Dutch Reformed sometimes speak of *miserable* sin and *censurable* sin. With others,⁹⁷¹ I consider the wording misleading. It gives the impression that some sins are tolerable while others are not. While God's demand is that his children be completely perfect (Matt. 5:40), the point is that sins which are committed against the sinner's will and which are confessed are forgiven, while hardening of heart and refusal to confess are not.⁹⁷² Those *intentionally* and *adamantly* denying a Scriptural teaching, and defending a teaching contrary to Scripture, are anathema (Gal. 1:6,9). Those holding a particular conviction, but who prove to be teachable, are to be given room in the church, including at the Lord's Table, as was stated by GS Den Haag 1914 of the GKN. For God forgives all sin that remain in us against our will, including doctrinal sins that remain in us due to our limited understanding and lack of insight.

*The limits of doctrinal purity often arise in relation to the doctrine of paedobaptism. GS Den Haag 1914 did not commit itself on this point, though it did speak of fundamental doctrines, implying there are also less fundamental doctrines. De Reuver makes clear by way of illustration that in the PKN there is room for the dedication of children,⁹⁷³ in spite of the fact that all confessional documents of the PKN, in so far as they address the issue of paedobaptism, confess paedobaptism. In North America, there is an association of churches that holds both Calvinist and Baptist confessions (the Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches). I believe churches are better served by a clear confessional stance on this issue: to what extent does the doctrine of infant baptism belong to the fundamentals of Scriptural teaching, and to what extent are elements therein *theologoumena*? As I see it, there is at present no room at the Lord's Table in a Reformed church for those adamantly denying infant baptism and actively refusing to have their children baptized.⁹⁷⁴*

3.4.8.5.7 Summary

In the foregoing, I have made clear which procedures can best be followed when a person holds convictions considered contrary to the confession, whether by himself or by another. I have argued that during the course of dealing with a doctrinal case, more room should be built in for deliberative discussions. I have indicated that there is a right to a first and a second appeal, and that during the course of the first appeal a person is suspended from office, but that during the course of the second appeal the decision of the classis is to be executed. Further, it is clear that suspected office bearers ought not to adjudicate in their own case. I have also explained that during a doctrinal case, suspected office bearers do not have a right to silence. Finally, I have explained how doctrinal supervision is to be exercised with respect to those not serving the church in an official capacity.

3.4.8.6 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In the foregoing, I have defined the concepts of doctrinal discipline, *gravamen*, suspension, and deposition. There should be a forum in which confessional doctrines can be discussed without endangering the proclamation of the church. I have defended two criteria that will indicate when a person has transgressed the boundaries of subscription. Transgression of subscription takes place when a person intentionally confesses something contrary to the commonly adopted confession, or when a person, intentionally or unintentionally, confesses something contrary to the commonly adopted confession in an environment or in a way that threatens the church. The church is to stand guard over the boundaries of transgression. I believe that broader assemblies should play a more important role in this than they have done in the Dutch Reformed tradition. Historically speaking, a *gravamen* has not proved helpful in strengthening the confessional substance of the church. It would be helpful if the confessional substance of the church were re-shaped to allow *gravamina* to

⁹⁷¹ Harmannij, *Wegwijs*, 113.

⁹⁷² See Van Dellen and Monsma, *CO Commentary*, 300-301.

⁹⁷³ De Reuver, *Eén Kerk in Meervoud*, 326-329.

⁹⁷⁴ For a substantive debate on the difference between the GKN(v) and Reformed Baptists see Douma, *Infant Baptism and the response Hulse, Baptism*.

function, and to stipulate a clear procedure by which *gravamina* might be submitted. I have indicated how this might be done. Finally, during the course of a doctrinal case, there should be more room for discussion with the accused, and this room should be clearly outlined in the church order. The procedure to be followed in a doctrinal case should also be more clearly outlined in the church order.

At various points in the foregoing, I have suggested how these elements might be contained in a church order article. Since these articles are found in Appendix III, together with proposals from previous sections, only a few pages from here, I have leave off giving an overview at this point.

3.4.9 SUMMARY

I have defined confessional binding as appropriating the confession of the church and considering it authoritative and determinative in one's life (3.4.1). Binding to confessions is a personal declaration of faith, an acknowledgement of the confessions as faithful to divine revelation, a promise to teach its substance, and an expression of the catholicity and unity of the church in time (3.4.2). While confessional binding is justified, there is to be a measure of tolerance. The line between the two is not easily drawn: there is a difference in binding between layers of confessing, and various perspectives need to be considered (exegetical, doctrinal, and presentational) (3.4.3). Being bound to Scripture and being bound to the confession is the same thing in principle; where there is tension, Scripture has priority. The way in which one may be bound to a confession can vary; empirical analysis identifies at least six possible ways. Were a defining confession of the sort described in 3.3.10 to exist, my preference would be substantive binding; in the present context, differentiating complete binding is most appropriate. Ideally, one should be bound to the first layer of confessing; in Dutch Reformed circles, one is implicitly also bound to elements of the second layer (3.4.4). Church members are to be bound to the substance of the church's confessing to the extent that they are able to comprehend it. Office bearers are further bound with respect to the task they are to fulfil within the church (3.4.5). With respect to the authority of the binding, three elements can be identified: the role of Scripture, the role of the church and the role of the individual person. Empirical analysis indicates three possible agents to enforce subscription: the national church, the local church, or the individual. I consider a combination of the first two—ecclesiastical or federative and regional-congregational binding—most appropriate (3.4.6).

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. In 3.4.7 and 3.4.8, I outlined the various practical aspects relating to subscribing the confessions and maintaining this subscription. Both sections ended with drafts for texts that might regulate subscription and put it into practice as I have outlined. These can be found in their complete form in Appendix III.

3.5 Conclusion

Doctrinal binding or confessional subscription is a multi-faceted issue. The foregoing has been no more than an attempt to systematize the various aspects, and provide some perspectives through which solutions may be sought to difficult problems. Usually, most of the solution to a problem is having the problem itself analysed and laid out clearly. However, the issue of confessional subscription is too complex and too emotionally charged for this study to be the last word on the matter. It does not want to be such, either.

I do hope that in presenting the lessons of the past, this study will contribute to a refinement of the confessional processes in the Dutch Reformed churches. May the Dutch experience be of help to those in other places, and may the Dutch themselves learn from the experiences of others. Thus the church will be able to concentrate itself on its task of proclaiming God's Word unmitigated in the world until Christ returns.

4. Conclusion

Many battles have been fought over confessions and confessional subscription. The wisdom of Solomon is needed to find a way in which confessions can function to the advancement of God's Kingdom. God has given a wonderful tool to His church for holding fast the faith once for all delivered to the saints, and for testifying to His great deeds. How then is this tool to be utilized in practical church life?

My study has investigated two questions:

1. Which views on confessional subscription have existed within the Dutch Reformed tradition since 1816 and which aspects of confessional subscription have received explicit attention?

2. Which systematic aspects can be discerned from the discussions on confessional subscription within the Reformed tradition in The Netherlands and how do these aspects relate to each other?

Part 2 has been my attempt at answering the first question, and Part 3 my attempt at answering the second. In this closing part, I wish to look forward. My attempt at giving an overview of the history of confessions and confessional subscription in Dutch Reformed circles will undoubtedly require fine tuning. There are also gaps that still need to be filled. Furthermore, reflection on the role of confessions in church life and confessional subscription will not come to an end with my study; indeed, I hope my research and reflection will provide an impetus to renewed study, in the spirit of men like Groen van Prinsterer, Kuyper, and Weijland.

The fruit of my study has been, for myself, an increased awareness of the various aspects that relate to and impact upon the issue of confessions and confessional subscription. In drawing my study to a close, I wish to pass a number of considerations and recommendations that flow from my research (4.1). A final subsection will draw the study as a whole to a close (4.2).

4.1 Considerations and Recommendations

4.1.1 LESSONS OF HISTORY

My historical research has once again impressed upon me the need to know one's history if one is not to repeat its mistakes. There are many lessons to be learned from the history covered in this study. I draw particular attention to the following.

One of history's lessons with respect to my subject material is that overemphasis and one-sidedness will eventually result in derailment. This is an obvious truth that should not need to be mentioned. Yet time and again, churches and persons find themselves entrenched in some of the same battles that were fought decades earlier. In particular, the tension within the Calvinist camp between the more juridically minded and the more medically minded continually surfaces. It is the tension between Groen van Prinsterer and Da Costa, between Van Toorenenbergen and Kuyper, between the GKN and what became the GKN(HV), and between the GKN(v) and the NGK. Thus it can probably not be stated often enough. If the issues surrounding confessions and confessional subscription are ever to be resolved, careful note must be taken of what has already been discussed in the past.

I single out for special attention the phrase once coined by Groen van Prinsterer. He opined that binding to the confession should be 'broad-minded and unambiguous'. I have indicated in my study that I believe this phrase has been misunderstood right from the moment it appeared in print. Since its appearance, it has been used in contexts where one must honestly wonder whether Groen himself would have approved. I am under the impression that the phrase is appealed to by many, not because they have understood what Groen meant by it and agree with him, but simply to sound historically orthodox. It is time, I believe, for a new phrase to be coined to say what Groen himself meant to say. More words will probably be needed to do that, for since Groen there have been many more positions on confessional subscription. However, it will not do to simply repeat what has been said in the past. If we are to stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us, we will need to make our forebears part of the debate, and to that end we will need to make every effort to understand our forebears as they spoke in their own time and context. History urges us to reflect thoroughly on the issue of confessions and confessional subscription, and all the factors involved, before drafting a new way in which confessing and confessional subscription might be given a proper place within church-life.

Another lesson that may be drawn from history is that debates on confessions and confessional subscription are always heated debates. One may rightly consider confessing to be the heartbeat of the church. If the heart does not beat, the body is dead. If the church does not confess, the church is no more. It should not surprise us that the role of confessions in the church has always been a hot issue. It should make us careful in debating the matters pertaining to it. All too quickly, one may lose sight of what the issue is all about. Christ urged His followers to be as gentle as doves and as wise as serpents in their confessing (Matthew 10:16, 32-33). This is also good counsel in debating the ins and outs of confessions and confessional subscription themselves. Many brothers have parted ways over this issue, while in their hearts they continued to appreciate their kinship in the Lord. That cannot be. Those who confess one Lord are part of one family. Those who hold one confession form one body. On the other hand, one cannot bypass the brokenness of this life, or deny that when it comes to practice, choices have to be made. Those who busy themselves with the subjects of confession and confessional subscription must understand for themselves how the brokenness of this life is to be combined with the fact that confessions and form of subscription the heartbeat of the church.

In short, history teaches us to avoid overemphasis and onesidedness, to re-articulate the confessional position, and to watch the tone of the debate as we take into account both the essential character of confessions and confessional subscription and the brokenness of this life.

4.1.2 JUDGING ERRORS

It has struck me in my reflection that the doctrines of justification and sanctification impact one's understanding not only of ethics but also of dogmatics. With respect to ethics, the Reformed have a clear understanding of how sin is to be considered. The classic form for the celebration of the Lord's Supper makes clear that it is not those that are without sin who are acceptable before God, but all those who fight against sin in their lives. Likewise, church discipline is not applied when a person sins, for all are sinners, but when a person lives in sin and refuses to repent.

When it comes to the sins of heresy and erring doctrine, however, there seems to be much less clarity. The decision of GS The Hague 1914 does give some indication, but it would seem that this is about all there is. While the orthodox Dutch Reformed are averse to perfectionism in an ethical sense, the same perfectionism seems prominent in a dogmatic sense. Those who have explicitly rejected such dogmatic perfectionism—one finds them particularly in the PKN, and to an extent in the NGK—have not been able to state clearly when and how tolerance should be practised and when and how tolerance would be contrary to God's will. Furthermore, to what extent should the brokenness of this life and the present but ongoing character of sanctification be taken into account where the church's confessing and confessional subscription by its members is concerned?

In short, further reflection is needed on the ins and outs of discipline of a doctrinal nature, not only where office-bearers are concerned, but also where the general church membership is concerned.⁹⁷⁵

4.1.3 THE BOUNDARIES OF THE CHURCH

It would seem that in the practice of the churches, the ecumenical creeds bind churches in the unity of a common-denominator faith, while confessions, catechisms, and canons distinguish those same churches from each other. Serious thought, especially from a church political perspective, needs to be given to the relationship between, on the one hand, confessional documents and semi-confessional documents (liturgical forms, doctrinal declarations) and, on the other hand, the boundaries of a church association. Would it not be wise for churches to re-think the contents of their confessions so as to determine what is considered a *sine qua non* for the church in every place and every age, and what is particular to the church? If the boundaries of an association of churches are considered to be marked by the confessions, should not all churches holding the same confession be united in one association, and should not churches that do not hold the same confessions go their separate ways? Given the Dutch setting, should not the CGKN and GKN(v) form one association of churches, and should not the various modalities within the PKN go their separate ways?

4.1.4 NORMA NORMATA SEMPER NORMANDA

In discussions on confessions and confessional subscription, Scripture is often referred to as the *norma normans* (standardizing standard) and confessions as the *norma normata* (standardized standard). This has proven confusing on two counts.

First of all, logically and chronologically speaking, the *norma normans* for a confession is not Scripture but the faith of those confessing. A confession, by definition, reflects the faith convictions of the person or body confessing. Of course, that faith has Scripture as its *norma normans*, and thus Scripture can be considered the *norma normans* for the confessions.

Secondly, some conclude from the perfect *normata* that confessions are to remain untouched. I have suggested that it would be more appropriate to see confessions as *norma normata semper normanda*, a standardized norm requiring constant standardization. If the church could place more

⁹⁷⁵ I note that in 2007 the United Reformed Churches in North America have created a study committee to look at this issue.

emphasis on the *semper normanda*, there would also be more openness to and room for expansion of the confession.⁹⁷⁶

4.1.5 REFLECTING FURTHER AFIELD

Confessions and confessional subscription are phenomena that are not influenced exclusively by theological considerations. It is necessary for those considering these phenomena to look further afield.

Choices made in various fields of philosophy influence the position one takes with respect to confessions and confessional subscription. For example, the field of semantics makes clear that language is constantly changing. Since confessions serve as fixed and prescriptive articulations of convictions, they ought to be constantly revised. One's epistemological position on knowledge determines one's view of confessions and confessional subscription.

With respect to epistemology, I have made it clear in my study that various models of thought exist, even among those in the Calvinist tradition. This should caution us in the use of epistemological arguments in debates on confessions and confessional subscription. However, it does not mean that epistemological premises should not be taken into consideration. While such premises cannot be determinative for a position taken, they can help us understand how confessions and confessional subscription might work in various contexts.

In my study, I have also paid attention to anthropology-psychology and law. These not being my fields of expertise, I have been very brief and careful. However, it is clear that these fields of science are of relevance to the issues of confessions and confessional subscription. Given different social contexts, not only in time but also in space, and given various approaches to legal texts, I consider it strongly advisable that those specialized in these fields do research into how these fields impact on the issue of confessing and confessional subscription, and how these fields may help resolve some of the issues at play. Questions that require further attention include: what roles do 'compliance' and 'appropriation' play in the issue of confessional subscription; to what extent do the three approaches to law (positivism, natural law, and interactionism) determine the functioning of confessions in the church; what judicial authority should be given to the various sorts of confessional documents; and how should the *trias politica* be given form in the church?

4.1.6 CONSTANTLY CONFORMING THE CONFESSED FAITH

FS-1619 had ministers subscribe the doctrine adopted by the church as stipulated in its confessional documents. AR-1816 stated that the task of churchboards was, among other things, 'to maintain their faith', where 'their' referred to Christianity in general and the NHK in particular. A question is, however, whether one can speak of an immutable set of church doctrines to which one then may be bound. I believe that discussions on confessions and confessional subscription insufficiently take note of the difference there is between "the faith once for all delivered to saints" (Jude :3) and "the faith of which the articles of our Christian Creed give a summation"(HC LD 7). Because the faith the church holds and the doctrine it teaches have passed through the filter of the human mind and heart, this faith and doctrine can never be considered immutable. Not being immutable, the verb 'to maintain' should not be used either. Given the mutability of faith and doctrine in the church, I believe we do better to speak of the constant conforming of faith and doctrine to the one norm, Scripture. This implies that during a doctrinal trial, the person teaching something deviating from the adopted confessions is the accused, the confessions form the accuser, and Scripture is the judge. A doctrinal trial may never end with a decision that has the confessions as the grounds. I would advise following the lead of GS Dordrecht 1618-19.

⁹⁷⁶ I have, during the course of my research, spoken a number of times before popular audiences on, among other things, new confessing. It has surprised me repeatedly how open church members are to new confessing when they realize how helpful it would be. The example I used in my speech was the doctrine of marriage, on which the Three Forms of Unity are practically silent while it is a much debated issue in Dutch churches and Dutch society.

To avoid misunderstanding, this does not mean the confessions should be considered suspect. Being mutable does not mean being mutative, just as being fallible does not mean failing.

4.1.7 REVISING AND EXPANDING THE CHURCH'S CONFESSING

In the course of my study, I frequently make statements that relate to a future revision of the confessional heritage. First of all, I challenge the oft-repeated view that confessions are born, not made, and thus that confessions cannot be (re)written whenever desired. This (romanticized) view of confessing does not hold up in the light of the history of creeds: neither the Heidelberg Catechism nor the Canons of Dort can be said to have been 'born'. The church must be always ready to give account of the hope that is in it; the church is called to confess every time the Word of God should be heard.

A new confession will also allow the church to create a confessional form that allows for expansion of the confession. One hurdle in coming to new confessing is that the church is at a loss where to place this. Should articles of faith be added to the Belgic Confession, or questions and answers to the Heidelberg Catechism? Should a new confession be created? By pouring the substance of the church's confessions into a new mould (or new moulds), a vehicle will be created that will encourage the church to work continually on its confessing.

If a new confession were to be written, those writing it should keep in mind that confessions deal not only with ontological realities (what is often called dogmatics) but also with prescription for life (ethics). The Ecumenical Creeds and the Three Forms of Unity—the Heidelberg Catechism being, to an extent, an exception—pay too little attention to those teachings of Christ that relate directly to the activities of His followers. Why should our confessions not state positions on warfare, cloning, donation of organs, same sex marriages, lotteries, entertainment, and addiction?

I have distinguished between three layers in confessing. The first layer is that material which is entirely ecclesiastical and primarily intended to be confessional. The second layer is that material and those moments that are entirely ecclesiastical and seek to apply the confessing of the church in concrete situations. The third layer is that material and those moments where matters are promulgated that are private but nevertheless stand in a church context. Documents that belong to the first layer are creeds and confessions; documents and actions belonging to the second layer include liturgical forms, church orders, and sermons, documents; and actions belonging to the third layer are private discussions. The problem in Dutch Reformed circles, so it seems to me, is that there are materials found in confessions that properly belong to the second layer of confessing, and materials found in the second layer that properly belong to the first layer. By way of illustration, I point to the different compositions of the church council in the Belgic Confession and the Church Order of Dort, and the fact that the doctrine of marriage is spelled out, not in a confessional document, but in a liturgical document. This confusion makes confessional subscription rather complex. I suggest that this confusion could be resolved by creating new confessions.

The variety of confessional documents exists to have confessions serve different ends. However, this has blurred matters to the extent that all confessional documents are, one way or another, pressed to serve in all functions. Thus confessional subscription in Dutch Reformed churches generally applies to all six confessional documents (generally the Three Forms of Unity explicitly and the Ecumenical Creeds implicitly) and the youth are instructed on the basis of all documents. It would make more sense to draft confessional documents for the various ends intended. A new catechism could include all materials from the Belgic Confession and Canons of Dort not found in the Heidelberg Catechism but considered necessary to be taught in the churches. A new confession of faith—I refer to it as the 'defining confession'—could categorically state all doctrine to which office bearers ought to be bound. I argue in my dissertation that the substance of existing confessions should be poured into new moulds to create doxological, declarative and defining confessional documents.

Should new confessions be written—my study outlines by what procedure this might be done—the text of such a confession should be as objective as possible. By 'objective', I mean that

the text of the confession will, in all respects, be as close to divine doctrine (Scripture) as possible. Subjective elements—worldviews, lines of argument, emotional language—are to be kept to a minimum. To put it differently, the locutionary and illocutionary factors should, where they cannot be identical, be as close to each other as possible. Thus a confession will be considered relevant in as wide a context, both spatially and temporally, as possible.

4.1.8 READING THE CONFESSION

All sorts of distinctions have been developed where the substance of confessional documents is concerned. The most common distinction is that between ‘form’ and ‘substance’; other ‘elements’ that have been identified include argumentation, Scripture proof texts, and illustrations. In debating confessional issues, an author will first classify a certain confessional statement, and then, on the basis of the classification, determine its binding character. I distrust this process of classification. The system of classification that seems to be commonly used is too cut-and-dried. The positions ‘one is bound to the fundamental articles in the confession’ and ‘one is bound to the substance and not the form of the confession’ are ambiguous, and open to varied applications. It makes more sense to work with a ‘spectrum’ or ‘scale’, a ‘relief’ of materials in confessional documents. However, even this approach does not remove ambiguity: there will always be a grey area that raises questions.

This raises the question, who determines the answer in the grey area? Since we are speaking of the confessing of the church, the church has the calling to decide this, and is to do so in its ecclesiastical assemblies, especially the so-called broader assemblies.

4.1.9 SUBSCRIBING THE CONFESSION

Current practice in most Dutch Reformed churches with their roots in the Dortian tradition is that church members attest to their bond with the confessions of the church upon publicly making profession of their faith; elders and deacons subscribe the confessions via a form of subscription during a church council meeting upon entering their respective offices; and ministers subscribe the confessions via forms of subscription during a classis and in a church council meeting upon entering their office. I argue that the practice for ministers, elders, and deacons at the ‘local’ level should be dropped, provided the ordination vows make explicit mention of the fact that office bearers are to be bound to the confessions. I also believe that, within a single association of churches, ministers should only be required to subscribe the confessions once, namely upon entering their ministry.

4.1.10 DOCTRINAL DISCIPLINE

Practising confessional subscription implies that doctrinal discipline is to be exercised. A church that claims to practice subscription but knows of no cases of discipline is a contradiction. However, I have become convinced that the Dortian practice as given form in the GKN/GKN(v) tradition is too little nuanced. Those wishing to hold on to Dortian principles do well to give thought to the structures developed in the NHK, GKN[s], and PKN. The line between tolerance (prophetic liberty) and confessional subscription is not easily drawn. Ideally, this line is drawn by the first layer of confessing, but no existing confession limits itself to just that first layer in its formulations. Furthermore, there is always a situational context that must be taken into consideration. For that reason, it would be wise to develop a procedure that allows for more discussion if a person, especially an office bearer, has doubts concerning an article of confession.

When there are doubts concerning the loyalty of an office bearer to the confessions he has subscribed, the issue is not just what the office bearer has said or written. Due attention should also be paid to the question whether the office bearer intentionally deviates from the confessing of the church, or does so in ignorance. I hold that the church may not play out ‘good intentions’ against ‘confessional unfaithfulness’. This applies both ways: good intentions do not excuse confessional

Conclusion

unfaithfulness and confessional unfaithfulness does not nullify good intentions. The church is to be righteous and compassionate in its considerations and decisions during a doctrinal trial.

4.1.11 ENCODING THE PRACTICE

During the course of my reflections, I have drafted a number of texts for a church order, a form for subscription, and liturgical forms that reflect my thoughts and findings. These texts can be found in Appendix III. This encoding of my preferred practice makes clear what procedure might be followed in order to come to new confessional materials for how church members in general and office bearers in particular might be bound to the confessional materials of the church, and how existing confessional materials might be challenged and changed. I believe that the fine tuning of these draft texts will be of help in coming to a new, more satisfying practice of confessional subscription.

4.2 In Closing

My research proves, first of all, that, in spite of the volume of material, it is possible to gain a bird's eye view of the subject matter. Being—to my knowledge—a first attempt for the Dutch Reformed setting, it is probably a rough picture that requires further nuance and filling in. However, I believe it has allowed me to create a systematic framework within which confessions and confessional subscription might be discussed. I have also been able to make clear that debating an element of these two phenomena usually extends further than just the point being debated. For example, those who disagree on the doctrine of revelation may debate the propriety of confessional subscription at length, but will never find common ground. Moreover, those who agree on the propriety of confessional subscription may do so for very different reasons, and find themselves diametrically opposed on another related issue. There are so many elements to these phenomena, so many combinations of positions one can hold, that having an overview itself is almost impossible. No wonder the issue of confessions and confessional subscription can be so diverse and divisive.

It is my humble prayer that my study will provide the necessary impetus for others to do additional study. As I have indicated, there are elements to these phenomena that fall beyond my expertise. It would be wonderful if someone who does have the necessary expertise will take up the gauntlet and focus on confessions and confessional subscription from the angles of philosophy, anthropology, and law. It would also be wonderful if a study similar to this could be written for other churches in Calvinist traditions. There is undoubtedly a Presbyterian story to be told, probably more than one, not to mention North American or South African versions of the Dutch Reformed tradition.

Such study would be with a view to having confessing and confessional subscription better serve their goals. The nearest goal would be to have the church maintain the faith once for all delivered to the saints. The final goal would be to glorify its God by declaring His great deeds.

Samenvatting

Titel: *Met dese onse onderteeckeninge: binding aan de belijdenis in de Nederlandse gereformeerde traditie met name vanaf 1816.*

1. Inleiding

Belijdenissen en binding aan de belijdenis zijn reeds lange tijd een heet hangijzer in protestantse kerken. De gereformeerde kerken in Nederland vormen daarop geen uitzondering. De aanvaarding van de Nederlandse Geloofsbelijdenis en de Heidelbergse Catechismus als documenten die het geloof van de kerken onder woorden brengen, dateren van haar eerste kerkelijke vergaderingen. Toen fundamentele verschillen ontstonden over de leerstukken van de uitverkiezing en verzoening werd een synode bijeengeroepen. Daartoe waren ook afgevaardigden van buitenlandse kerken uitgenodigd. Deze synode, de Generale Synode Dordrecht 1618-19, ontwierp en aanvaardde de Dordtse Leerregels. Zo kwamen de gereformeerde kerken in Nederland aan hun drie belijdenissen, samen bekend als de Drie Formulieren van Eenheid, naast de drie oecumenische symbolen die zij gemeen hadden met kerken in de westelijke wereld.

Als nationale synode van de kerken heeft GS Dordrecht 1618-19 ook een kerkorde ontworpen. De artikelen 52 en 53 van deze kerkorde schrijven de binding aan de belijdenissen van de kerk voor. Om er zeker van te zijn dat ondertekenaars wisten waar zij aan gebonden werden en wat hun rechten en plichten waren als zij eenmaal ondertekend hadden, werd een ondertekeningsformulier ontworpen. Zo werd binding aan de belijdenis door middel van een formulier een gewoonte in gereformeerde kerken in heel Nederland.

Onderzocht is hoe deze binding heeft gefunctioneerd in gereformeerde kerken die op één of andere manier de traditie van GS Dordrecht 1618-19 volgen. Doel hiervan was om te leren verstaan hoe zo iets het beste kan functioneren. Twee vragen in het bijzonder hebben de aandacht gehad:

1. *Welke standpunten m.b.t. binding aan de belijdenis hebben vanaf 1816 bestaan binnen de Nederlandse gereformeerde traditie en welke aspecten van binding aan de belijdenis hebben expliciet aandacht gehad?*
2. *Welke systematische aspecten kunnen afgeleid worden van de discussies over binding aan de belijdenis binnen de gereformeerde traditie in Nederland, hoe verhouden deze aspecten zich tot elkaar, en hoe zou men binding aan de belijdenis doeltreffend kunnen regelen?*

Deze publicatie bestaat uit twee delen. Het eerste deel is een geschiedkundig overzicht van bezinning op belijdenissen en binding aan de belijdenis in de Nederlandse gereformeerde kerken sinds 1816. In dit eerste deel zijn opgenomen een vertaling van de teksten van kerkordeartikelen en ondertekeningsformulieren die officieel gediend hebben in Nederlandse gereformeerde kerken sinds het convent van Wezel, 1571 (traditioneel 1568); dit convent wordt over het algemeen gezien als de eerste kerkelijke vergadering van de gezamenlijke Nederlandse gereformeerde kerken. Het tweede deel is een systematische bezinning op het onderwerp belijdenissen en binding aan de belijdenis. Voor deze bezinning is vooral gebruik gemaakt van data uit het andere deel, hoewel soms ook aandacht is geschonken aan andere wetenschappen (filosofie, antropologie en recht) en andere kerkelijke tradities, met name de presbyteriaanse.

Gezien de aard van deze samenvatting wordt het geschiedkundig deel slechts kort behandeld en wordt meer in detail getreden over het systematische deel.

2. Geschiedkundig deel

Om verschillende redenen is het jaar 1816 als startpunt gekozen. Voor de periode tot en met GS Dordrecht 1618-19 bestaan reeds een aantal studies over belijdenissen en binding aan de belijdenis in Nederland. De periode tussen GS Dordrecht 1618-19 en GS Den Haag 1816 heeft weinig aandacht gehad. Daar lijken verschillende redenen voor te bestaan: de stukken zijn niet gemakkelijk toegankelijk en er was weinig bezinning of verschil in praktijk vanwege het beleid van de civiele overheid. Het jaar 1816 is een goed startpunt omdat op dat moment de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk (NHK) een nieuwe kerkorde aanvaardde.

Bij het aanvaarden van deze nieuwe kerkorde veranderde de NHK haar officiële standpunt m.b.t. binding aan de belijdenis. Hoewel deze wijziging niet geheel aan de aandacht van de kerken ontsnapte, ontstonden een collectieve discussie en bezinning hierover pas in 1826, toen de arts A. Capadose het standpunt van ds. W. Broes aanvocht. Een jaar later bestreed een publicatie door een anonieme schrijver de heersende regels in de NHK. Toen bleek dat deze geschreven was door ds. D. Molenaar brak een polemiek uit. Volgens Molenaar zou het onder de huidige regels voor een rooms-katholiek of zelfs voor een jood mogelijk zijn om vanaf een NHK-kansel te preken.

In de jaren 1830 werd de spanning zo groot dat een behoorlijk deel brak met de NHK in wat bekend is geworden als de afscheiding van 1834. De afgescheiden kerken, die in het begin niet erg homogeen waren, kozen om terug te keren naar de kerkorde van Dordrecht, inclusief haar voorschriften over binding aan de belijdenis. Toen in de jaren 1850 een zekere mate van eenheid werd bereikt—de meerderheid van afgescheiden kerken waren verenigd in de CAGK (na 1869: CGKN)—, stelden synodes van de CAGK duidelijke verklaringen op over hun confessionele standpunt.

In de NHK werd het debat over belijdenissen en binding aan de belijdenis voortgezet. Aangezien de voortrekkers in de NHK verschillende stromingen aanhingen, waren er verscheidene standpunten die alle met veel energie verdedigd werden. Binnen de zogenaamde richting van de supranaturalisten is een beweging door de tijd heen waar te nemen van binding aan min of meer de gehele inhoud van de belijdenissen naar binding aan slechts de meest basale fundamente. De groninger richting, ontstaan in de latere jaren 1820 en begin jaren 1830, was tegen welke vorm van binding aan de belijdenis ook. Aanhangers van deze richting hadden meer aandacht voor de geest van het belijden. Dit standpunt deelden zij met de ethische richting, ontstaan in de jaren 1840, hoewel het gedachtegoed van de ethischen over het algemeen meer gemeen had met orthodox-gereformeerde leerstukken dan dat van de groningers. Supranaturalisme was op haar retour en werd vervangen door twee nieuwe richtingen: het modernisme en de apologeten. Aanhangers van beide richtingen waren voorstanders van het opstellen van heldere criteria voor overtuigingen en waren rationalistisch in hun methodiek. Zij verschilden in het feit dat het modernisme de wetenschap, rede of ervaring als bron had, terwijl de apologeten de Bijbel als bron hadden. Tenslotte dienen genoemd te worden de calvinisten die, vanuit dogmatisch perspectief, onderverdeeld mogen worden in ‘onbevangen’ en ‘traditioneel’. Beide richtingen verdedigden binding aan de Drie Formulieren van Eenheid in hun geheel. Zij verschilden in het feit dat onbevangen calvinisten nadachten over de belijdenissen en binding aan de belijdenis, zelfs bereid waren om ermee aan de slag te gaan, terwijl traditionele calvinisten conservatief waren, resulterend in historicisme en verstening van de belijdenissen van de kerk.

Binnen de groep van calvinisten kan ook een kerkrechtelijk onderscheid gemaakt worden, een vleugel met een meer medische neiging en een vleugel met een meer juridische neiging. De ‘medischen’ waren van mening dat een vals evangelie bestreden moest worden met prediking en een appel op het geweten, terwijl ‘juridischen’ van mening waren dat het valse evangelie bestreden moest worden met de toepassing van wetten en regelingen. In de negentiende eeuw hielden veel debatten zich bezig met het verstaan van deze twee polen en met het vraagstuk of deze standpunten verenigd konden worden.

Dutch Summary

In 1841 aanvaardde de Synode Den Haag de volgende definitie van binding aan de belijdenis: iemand is gebonden aan die leer die “in haren aard en geest het wezen en de hoofdzaak uitmaakt van de belijdenis der Hervormde Kerk.” In reactie ontstond de uitdrukking “onbekrompen en ondubbelzinnig” als weergave van het calvinistisch, gereformeerde of Dordtse standpunt m.b.t. binding aan de belijdenis. Met deze uitdrukking wilde men duidelijk maken hoe men gebonden is aan heel de inhoud van de belijdenissen, zonder deze inhoud als een keurslijf te ervaren. In de twintigste eeuw is deze uitdrukking door de meeste gereformeerde kerken gebruikt om hun standpunt te verdedigen. Daar de standpunten van deze gereformeerde kerken inhoudelijk zeer verschillen, is de uitdrukking betekenisloos geworden.

Eind jaren 1860 en gedurende de jaren 1870 stond een nieuwe generatie op. Deze generatie heeft de juistheid van binding aan de belijdenis net zo fel besproken als de generatie ervoor. Er kan onderscheid worden gemaakt tussen twee kringen van bezinning.

De eerste kring is die van de NHK. De NHK was een kerk geworden waarin allerlei belijders van de christelijke godsdienst een thuis konden vinden, van vrijzinnigen die de waarheid van de Schrift ontkenen tot orthodoxe hypercalvinisten. De verschillende partijen worstelden met hun onduidelijke identiteit als kerk en probeerden voortdurend een *modus vivendi* te vinden voor de verschillende richtingen in de ene kerk. Deze worsteling zou voortduren tot 1951, toen de NHK een nieuwe kerkorde aanvaardde.

De tweede kring is die van hen die zichzelf zagen als orthodoxe calvinisten, zowel binnen als buiten de NHK. De spanning tussen een nadruk op de medische benadering en de juridische benadering bleef. Uiteindelijk leidde de bezinning tot een scheur in het kamp van de calvinisten en een tweede scheur in de NHK in 1886. De kerken die weggingen verenigden zich in 1892 met de grote meerderheid van de afgescheiden kerken om de GKN te vormen. De GKN keerden terug naar de Dordtse kerkorde en haar manier van binden aan de belijdenis. Aan het begin van de twintigste eeuw waren er dus twee grote kerkverbanden in Nederland: de NHK met een losse binding aan de belijdenis en de GKN met een strakke binding aan de belijdenis. Naast de NHK en GKN bestonden verscheidene kleinere groepen van afgescheiden kerken als de CGKN en de Gereformeerde Gemeenten, die, als het gaat om binding aan de belijdenis, een standpunt hadden gelijk aan dat van de GKN.

De eerste helft van de twintigste eeuw kan gekarakteriseerd worden als een periode van consolidatie en bezinning. Krachten binnen de GKN probeerden de boodschap van de negentiende eeuw om te zetten in daden. Pogingen om het belijden van de kerk te herzien faalden echter en leerbesluiten leidden tot scheuringen binnen de GKN, eerst in 1926 en nogmaals in 1944. De eerste breuk was aanleiding voor de formatie van de GKN(HV), die in 1946 herenigden met de NHK. De tweede breuk was aanleiding voor de formatie van de GKN(v). (Zij die in de GKN bleven worden verder aangeuid als de GKN[s].)

In 1951 aanvaardde de NHK een nieuwe kerkorde. Haar structuur leek weer meer op de door de Dordtse Synode voorgeschreven kerkorde en zij erkende dat een kerk een belijdende kerk hoort te zijn die leertucht praktiseert. Toen in 1961 een tienjarig moratorium op leertucht afliep, bleek echter dat de praktijk in de NHK niet veranderd was.

De GKN[s] was behoorlijk geschrokken van de gebeurtenissen in 1926 en 1944. Gedurende de jaren 1950 herzagen de GKN[s] de kerkorde, maar bleven confessioneel in de lijn van Dordt. Toen zich echter nieuwe leertuchtzaken voordeden, bleken de GKN[s] onwillig om leertucht te oefenen, zelfs waar het leerpunten betrof die afweken van het calvinistisch standpunt m.b.t. verzoening. Vanaf eind jaren 1960 was er vanuit confessioneel oogpunt weinig verschil tussen de NHK en GKN[s].

Na de Tweede Wereldoorlog begon de NHK discussies met andere protestantse kerken om te onderzoeken of de kerken zich niet konden verenigen in een kerkelijke organisatie. De GKN[s] stonden hier in eerste instantie afwijzend tegenover, maar in de jaren 1970 kwamen de GKN[s] en de NHK in een verenigingsproces dat bekend zou komen te staan als “Samen op Weg”. In de jaren 1980 voegde ook een Lutherse kerk zich bij deze karavaan. In 2004 verenigden deze drie kerken

zich in wat de PKN is gaan heten. Sommige gemeenten van de NHK scheurden over deze zaak, en een gedeelte hiervan (her)stichtte een eigen kerkverband. Ook sommige gemeenten van de GKN[s] weigerden deel te nemen aan de vereniging. De kwestie van belijdenissen en binding aan de belijdenis vormde één van de hoofdzaken in het SoW-proces. De PKN kent als belijdenissen de oecumenische symbolen, de onveranderde Augsburgse Confessie, de Heidelbergse Catechismus, de Geneefse Catechismus en de Nederlandse Geloofsbelijdenis met de Dordtse Leerregels. De PKN erkent het belang van de Verklaring van Barmen en het Konkordie van Leuvenberg, maar beschouwt deze niet als belijdenissen. Ambtsdragers van de PKN dienen zich te gedragen in de weg van het belijden van de kerk. In de praktijk krijgen theologen van zeer vrijzinnige huize ruimte binnen de PKN.

Ook de GKN(v) bleven worstelen met het vraagstuk van binding aan de belijdenis. De breuk van 1944 betrof een binding aan de belijdenis die de GKN(v) onjuist vonden, vandaar de aanduiding ‘vrijgemaakt’. In de jaren 1950 en 1960 vonden debatten plaats over de precieze grens van binding aan de belijdenis. Toen sommigen leerstukken aanvochten waarvan anderen vonden dat men daar aan gebonden was, ontstond een nieuwe breuk, waaruit de NGK geboren is. De NGK zijn tegenwoordig vanuit confessioneel oogpunt iets toleranter dan de GKN(v). De standpunten van de GKN(v) en CGKN zijn op het punt van binding aan de belijdenis gelijk, zowel in de regelgeving als in de praktijk; beiden houden vast aan de lijn van GS Dordrecht 1618-19. Zowel de GKN(v) als de CGKN houden gesprekken met de NGK over wat juist is.

Dit historisch overzicht maakt duidelijk dat het functioneren van belijdenissen en de kwestie van binding aan de belijdenis moeilijk hanteerbaar en complex is. Gereformeerden in Nederland hebben ernstig geworsteld met deze materie en allerlei standpunten zijn ontstaan. Geen enkele is echt bevredigend gebleken. De confessionele identiteit van de PKN is niet duidelijk. Er is ontevredenheid over de praktijk van binding aan de belijdenis binnen de GKN(v), CGKN, NGK, alsmede de verscheidene Gereformeerde Gemeenten. Vaak is er geroepen om nieuw belijden, ze is er nog steeds niet. Bovendien, het debat over de beste wijze van binding aan de belijdenis en de wijze waarop belijdenissen dienst kunnen doen in kerken gaat onverminderd door.

3. Systematisch Deel

In dit tweede deel wordt de materie verwerkt die uit het eerste deel naar voren komen. Bouwend op vondsten uit historisch onderzoek, ontspint zich een systematisch verhaal over de kwestie belijdenissen en binding aan de belijdenis. Dat gebeurt in vier concentrische cirkels. Eerst wordt gelet op randzaken waarvan gebleken is dat die verbonden zijn met deze kwestie: theologische of dogmatische standpunten en aspecten die te maken hebben met filosofie, antropologie en recht (3.1). Vervolgens wordt aandacht besteed aan de fenomenen geloof en leer en hoe deze functioneren in de kerk (3.2). Deze drie fenomenen vormen namelijk de context of het milieu waarbinnen belijdenissen en binding aan de belijdenis fungeren. In de derde stap komt een overzicht van belijden en belijdenissen (3.3). In de laatste stap is er aandacht voor binding aan de belijdenis en haar handhaving (3.4).

3.1 Kader

Het historisch onderzoek maakt duidelijk dat keuzes die gemaakt worden in de theologie of dogmatiek, filosofie, antropologie en recht vergaande gevolgen kunnen hebben voor de standpunten die ingenomen worden m.b.t. belijdenissen en binding aan de belijdenis. Men heeft in het verleden te weinig ingezien welke rol deze randzaken spelen. Daarom verdienen zij extra aandacht. Behoorlijk wat aandacht is besteed aan dogmatische standpunten, daar deze studie ook in het kader van de theologie staat. M.b.t. de terreinen van filosofie, antropologie en recht is deze studie wat minder stellig in haar conclusies. Het is vooral m.b.t. deze drie dat meer bezinning zou moeten plaatsvinden. Op het vakgebied filosofie, in het bijzonder de epistemologie, vindt zulke

bezinning plaats. Op de vakgebieden antropologie en recht moet systematische bezinning m.b.t. tot het onderwerp van deze studie nog beginnen.

Binnen het terrein van de dogmatiek wordt aandacht besteed aan de leer van openbaring, de leer van de mens en de leer van de kerk.

Het hoofddoel van openbaring is dat de mens het beeld van God vertoont. Haar eerste doel is om God bekend te maken, verdere doelen zijn voorschriften voor hoe de mens de werkelijkheid moet verstaan en hoe de mens moet leven. Zodoende moet de mens de openbaring erkennen en zich eigen maken door invoering in het leven—dat is het proces van belijden. Het feit dat God ervoor kiest om Zichzelf aan de mens via communicatie te openbaren, is bewijs dat de mens goddelijke openbaring kan ontvangen. In tegenstelling tot theologieën met een achtergrond in de epistemologie van Kant wordt gesteld dat het voor de mens mogelijk is het goddelijke te kennen, al is die kennis niet volmaakt. Het is daarom voor de mens niet onmogelijk goddelijke openbaring weer te geven in zijn belijden. Die openbaring is te vinden in de schepping en de Heilige Schrift. De mens kan de lessen van de schepping niet lezen zonder de bril van de Schrift. De religieuze ervaringen van de mens zijn geen bron voor openbaring, zij zijn een reactie op openbaring. Ook is de Schrift geen getuigenis van religieuze ervaringen, zij is zelf goddelijke openbaring. De Schrift is geïnspireerd, door God geademd, en haar canon is afgesloten. Uiteindelijk is de Schrift de norm voor het belijden van de mens. Zij is gezagvol. Zij is duidelijk, als men de Schrift maar in haar context leest. Het is vooral het loslaten van het *sola Scriptura* van de Reformatie waardoor belijdenissen onder druk kwamen te staan in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw. Een onzuiver idee van goddelijke openbaring heeft rechtstreekse gevolgen voor de afzwakking van het gezag van kerkelijke belijdenisgeschriften.

Vervolgens wordt aandacht geschonken aan de leer van de mens. De mens is geschapen om Gods beeld te zijn. Dit behelst onder meer de verheerlijking van God. Omdat belijden o.a. het verwoorden en uiten van overtuigingen tot Gods eer is, is belijden wezenlijk voor de oorspronkelijke staat van de mens. D.m.v. belijden looft hij God, brengt hij tot uitdrukking hoe hij Gods wil verstaat en verkondigt hij Gods wezen aan heel de schepping. De mens viel echter in de zonde. Hij blijft Gods beeld, hoewel dit beeld-zijn in de praktijk verstoord en bekrast is. Belijden blijft behoren tot het wezen van de mens, ook in zijn gevallen staat, maar van nature is ze niet langer gefocust op de verheerlijking van God en kan niet langer vertrouwd worden als een zuivere verwoording van Gods wil. Het belijden van de mens is vaak gericht op zelfverheerlijking en is een verwoording van eigen overtuigingen. Zodanig is het belijden van de mens een middel geworden waardoor de positie van de mens t.o.v. God duidelijk wordt. Onvolmaakt belijden veroordeelt de mens voor God. Door Gods genade is een weg naar herstel geschonken. Door het offer van Christus wordt een mens gerechtvaardigd voor God. De veroordeling die ontstaat vanwege het belijden kan dus te boven gekomen worden. Bovendien herstelt God de mens in zijn oorspronkelijke staat, een proces waarbij de Christus de norm is. De heiliging is niet per sé een lineair proces, ze is wel progressief en eindigt in de vervolmaking van de mens. Zodanig heeft ook het proces van de heiliging invloed op het belijden van de mens. Door de tijd heen zal het belijden van de gelovige zich steeds meer conformeren aan Gods openbaring. Gaandeweg de loop van bezinning op belijdenissen en binding aan de belijdenis hebben sommigen deze leer verlaten. Wie de diepte van de zondeval ontkent, kan de mens als bron van waarheid zien en maakt de weg open voor confessionele onverschilligheid. Wie het bereik van rechtvaardiging en het dynamische karakter van de heiliging ontkent, maakt de weg open voor confessioneel perfectionisme en kerkelijk sektarisme.

Tenslotte wordt aandacht geschonken aan de leer van de kerk, de ecclesiologie.

Een kort overzicht van conclusies, genomen op basis van de Schrift, maakt duidelijk dat de kwestie van belijdenissen en binding aan de belijdenis nauw verweven is met de ecclesiologie.

Sommige theologen bijvoorbeeld, maken onderscheid tussen de gemeente als het verkoren volk van God en de kerk als de plek waar gemeente en wereld vermengd zijn. In deze benadering is belijden gepast voor de gemeente maar niet voor de kerk, want zulk belijden zou de wereld uit de

kerk zetten. Dit onderscheid is theologisch onjuist. De kerk is zowel het werk van God als een menselijk verschijnsel. Zodoende kent haar bestaan zowel goddelijke als menselijke elementen. Zo is het belijden van de kerk een uitdrukking van menselijk geloof, geboren uit een daad van God en wil het Gods wil weerspiegelen. Hoewel men de kerk nooit in één moment kan zien, is zij daarmee nog niet onzichtbaar. Zichtbare werkelijkheden behoren tot het wezen van de kerk, ook haar belijdenisgeschriften en structuren die daarbij horen. De vier eigenschappen van de kerk—haar eenheid, heiligheid, katholiciteit en apostoliciteit—hebben rechtstreekse gevolgen voor het belijden van de kerk. Het belijden van de kerk moet haar eenheid, haar heiligheid, haar grootte en haar trouw aan de apostolische traditie duidelijk maken. De kenmerken van de kerk—trouw in prediking, trouw in bediening van de sacramenten en trouw in tucht—hebben minder rechtstreeks gevolgen voor haar belijden. Omdat zij Gods wil uitdragen, zijn belijdenissen een vorm van prediking, daarin moeten ze trouw zijn. Als een middel waardoor de kerk zich bewaart bij Gods Woord zijn zij onderdeel van de tucht in de kerk en moeten zij overeenkomstig de geboden van Christus vormgegeven worden.

De wijze waarop de kerk georganiseerd is, vraagt ook de nodige aandacht. Het is een crux in de debatten in de NHK en gedurende het SoW-proces dat voerde tot het vormen van de PKN. De Schrift maakt duidelijk dat de kerk de opdracht heeft om de leer van Jezus vast te houden en die te verkondigen; ze heeft de opdracht te belijden. Men moet voorzichtig zijn, echter, om van dit belijden niet te veel te maken. Vaak wordt beweerd dat het belijden van de kerk een norm is die genormeerd is aan de Schrift en dat dit belijden “gehandhaafd” moet worden. Dit zou tot verstening van het belijden van de kerk kunnen leiden. Men vergeet dat de Schrift altijd door de filter van het geloof van de mens gaat en dat dus de juiste volgorde is: Schrift → geloof van de mens → belijden. Het zou daarom meer juist zijn om te spreken van het handhaven van de Schrift (niet: belijden) en het voortdurend conformeren (niet: handhaven) van het belijden van de kerk aan de Schrift, dan om te spreken van het handhaven van het belijden van de kerk.

Evenzo heeft kerkrecht gevolgen voor de praktijk van binding aan de belijdenis. Gereformeerden in Nederland kennen twee soorten kerkrecht, die in deze studie de namen Dordts en Haags heb gegeven. Beide kennen verschillende varianten. In de context van Dordts kerkrecht is er een discussie geweest over de wijze waarop de plaatselijke kerken een verband van kerken vormen. We spreken hier van ‘autonomisme’ in tegenstelling tot wat in presbyteriaanse kringen ‘connectionalisme’ heet (in Nederlandse kringen soms ‘oud kerkrecht’ en ‘nieuw kerkrecht’). Een mate van connectionalisme is te rechtvaardigen, zowel op basis van de Schrift als vanuit het oorspronkelijke kerkrecht van de gereformeerde kerken in Nederland aan het eind van de zestiende en begin van de zeventiende eeuw. Deze opvatting heeft gevolgen voor de kerkelijke vergaderingen die toezicht houden op binding aan de belijdenis. De verhouding kerk-staat verdient ook aandacht. Tussen de GS Dordrecht 1618-19 en de Revolutie van 1795 schreven de overheden in Nederland binding aan de Drie Formulieren van Eenheid voor. De conclusie is dat de staat geen recht heeft om binding aan de belijdenis op te leggen.

Belangrijk voor de kwestie van het belijden van de kerk is ook de vraag waartoe de kerk bestaat. God heeft de kerk gesticht tot zijn eer, om de waarheid te verkondigen en verdedigen, om een gemeenschap te zijn waarbinnen en vanwaaruit gelovigen hun geloof in praktijk kunnen brengen. Mensen komen bijeen in een kerk omdat zij daar gelijkgezinde mensen tegenkomen. Door haar belijden volbrengt de kerk de plichten die haar door God zijn opgelegd. Datzelfde belijden brengt ook het denken van de kerk tot uitdrukking.

De kwestie van belijden is breder dan het terrein van de theologie. Doorgaans gaat het gesprek over belijdenisgeschriften, uitgeschreven en geijkte documenten die het belijden van de kerk onder woorden brengen. Zodoende zijn er filosofische aspecten in het spel. Er is een semantische vraag: in hoeverre kan de taal innerlijke overtuigingen uitdrukken? Er is ook een epistemologische vraag: in hoeverre kunnen innerlijke overtuigingen bindend zijn voor anderen? Omdat ik

wetenschappelijk weinig onderlegd ben in de filosofie ben ik voorzichtig geweest in het trekken van conclusies.

Semantiek. Op het terrein van de semantiek is men het er over het algemeen over eens dat verklaringen bestaan uit drie handelingen: dat wat gezegd wordt, dat wat men wil zeggen en dat wat het gezegde teweeg brengt. Vaak wordt gedacht dat datgene wat gezegd wordt de betekenis van een verklaring is. Maar het is juist dat wat men wil zeggen. Afhankelijk van hun context hebben verklaringen constatieve, expressieve, commissieve en prescriptieve functies. Zij, die het utiliteitsmodel van de taal aanhangen, stellen dat de hoofdtaak van de filosofie (en van de systematische theologie) het analyseren van concepten is om verklaringen te formuleren. Van dit alles kennis genomen hebbend, is duidelijk dat zij alle gevolgen hebben voor de kwestie van belijden en binding aan de belijdenis. In hoeverre kunnen we stellen dat wij weten wat belijdenissen willen zeggen? Welke semantische functies vervullen verklaringen in de belijdenissen? Wat betekent het feit dat taal verouderd voor het functioneren van eeuwenoude belijdenissen?

Epistemologie. Het is gebruikelijk om kennis te definiëren als een gerechtvaardigd, waar geloof. Vooral sinds de verlichting heeft men het bindend karakter van belijdenissen ontkend; want belijdenissen vertolken overtuigingen en veronderstellingen, geen verklaringen van kennis. Epistemologisch gezien zijn er vragen te stellen bij dit standpunt. Door bezinning op de denkbeelden van twee calvinistische filosofen wordt de bewering onderzocht dat kennis een gerechtvaardigd, waar geloof is. Tevens wordt de vraag onderzocht of het waar is dat geloofsovertuigingen niet bindend kunnen zijn. Het wordt duidelijk dat over beide zaken meer te zeggen valt. Het vraagstuk is niet te beantwoorden. Wel is bewezen dat epistemologische argumenten onvoldoende zijn om het bestaansrecht van belijdenissen en binding aan de belijdenis aan te vechten.

Er lijkt ook een antropologische kant te zitten aan de kwestie belijden en belijdenisgeschriften. Een aantal algemen studies dienen als gids om na te gaan waar meer onderzoek nodig is. Daarbij concentreert deze studie zich op het terrein van de sociale psychologie. Het vraagstuk van conformisme en de kwesties van eigenmaking en meegaandheid krijgen vooral aandacht. Mensen willen bij een groep horen en conformeren zich dus aan de normen van die groep. Sommigen maken zich die normen eigen, terwijl anderen slechts meegaan met de normen zonder ze inhoudelijk aan te hangen. Weer anderen verwerpen de normen en komen buiten de groep te staan. Nader onderzoek zou nieuwe en belangrijke inzichten kunnen geven in het functioneren van binding aan de belijdenis.

Tenslotte is gekeken naar juridische aspecten van belijdenissen en binding aan de belijdenis. Ook recht behoort niet tot mijn gebied van wetenschappelijke kennis. Aan de hand van twee gezaghebbende Nederlandse studies is duidelijk dat in ieder geval het volgende meer aandacht vraagt.

Vaak wordt een onderscheid gemaakt tussen inhoudelijk recht—zaken die te maken hebben met wat een wet wil bereiken—en formeel recht—zaken die te maken hebben met hoe het inhoudelijk recht kan werken. Het gebonden zijn aan belijdenissen is inhoudelijk recht, de procedures om te komen tot belijden en het vorm geven aan binding aan de belijdenis zijn formeel recht. Men moet altijd voor ogen houden dat formeel recht het inhoudelijk recht nooit mag domineren. Dit onderscheid is van belang als het gaat om het gezag van belijdenissen en binding aan de belijdenis.

Bij het recht kunnen drie betekenisystemen of benaderingen van het recht onderscheiden worden. Ze worden aangeduid met de termen positivisme, natuurrecht en interactionisme. Bij mijn weten is dit onderscheid in de traditie van het kerkrecht waarin ik onderwezen ben nog nooit bestudeerd. Veel van de spanning die merkbaar is in debatten over belijdenissen en binding aan de belijdenis lijkt te maken te hebben met deze drie benaderingen. Iemand die meer thuis is op het gebied van recht en goed bekend is met het kerkelijk leven zou dit nader moeten onderzoeken. Dit

zal orthodoxe calvinisten helpen de processen die in hun midden plaatsvinden beter te begrijpen en taxeren.

Aandacht dient ook besteed te worden aan de verschillende bronnen voor het recht. Over het algemeen worden vier bronnen geïdentificeerd: vastgestelde wetten, verdragen, jurisprudentie en algemeen recht. Wanneer men een parallel trekt met gereformeerd kerkrecht dan kan men spreken van de kerkorde, belijdenisgeschriften, besluiten van kerkelijke vergaderingen en de vele ongeschreven gewoonten. In het civiel recht ontstaan problemen wanneer deze bronnen elkaar tegenspreken en men het er niet over eens is welke bron voorrang heeft. Hetzelfde geldt bij discussies in kerkelijke kringen. Hiervan kennis genomen hebbend en gezien mijn ervaring in kerkelijke kringen ontstaat het vermoeden dat de oplossingen in het civiel recht en het kerkrecht uiteenlopen. Dit vraagt om zorgvuldig onderzoek.

Tenslotte wordt aandacht geschonken aan de *trias politica*. Het civiel recht maakt een scherp onderscheid tussen de drie armen van macht: wetgevend, wetuitvoerend en wethandhavend. Het gereformeerd kerkrecht (m.u.v. de NHK/PKN) doet dit niet. Want de wetgevende en wethandhavende instanties zijn verenigd in hetzelfde orgaan: de kerkelijke vergadering. Doorgaans bevinden zich daar ook de wetuitvoerende machten. Het is de vraag of dit verstandig is. De verhouding tussen de machten kan vervolgens getypeerd worden of als een balans van machten, of als een scheiding van machten. Het civiel recht is ambigu wat betreft de verhouding tussen de machten. Het kerkrecht zou moeten neigen naar een balans van machten.

Het is duidelijk dat randzaken verstrekkende gevolgen hebben voor de kwestie van belijden en binding aan de belijdenis en dat nog veel studie nodig is.

3.2. Geloof, Leer en Kerk

Na deze randzaken bestudeerd te hebben, stappen we in de richting van de kern van belijden en binding aan de belijdenis. De context, of het milieu, waarbinnen belijden functioneert, is die van geloof, leer en de kerk. Het leek raadzaam gevonden om eerst naar geloof en leer op zichzelf te kijken, dan naar de twee in combinatie en tenslotte naar hoe zij in de kerk functioneren.

Geloof is de innerlijke overtuiging dat resulteert in vertrouwen, trouw en kennis. Het onderscheid tussen *fides qua* (de activiteit van geloof) en *fides quae* (de inhoud van geloof) is legitiem, maar moet niet tot een dilemma gemaakt worden, zoals vaak gebeurt in debatten over de juistheid van binding aan de belijdenis. Hoewel het geloof een *innerlijke* overtuiging is, kan zij tot uitdrukking gebracht worden; deze handeling staat bekend als belijden. Belijdenissen zijn dus uitdrukkingen of verwoordingen van geloof. De Bijbelse uitdrukkingen “maten van geloof”, “groot geloof” en “klein geloof” houden alle verband met *fides qua*; zij kunnen dus niet gebruikt worden om grenzen te stellen aan binding aan de belijdenis.

Leer is de verwoording van een overtuiging, doorgaans met de intentie om deze overtuiging te leren. In het Nederlands heeft een verschuiving in betekenis plaats gevonden. Aan het begin van de negentiende eeuw werd de term vooral gebruikt voor “onderwijzen”. In de loop van de twintigste eeuw was het begrip “onderwijzen” niet meer wezenlijk voor het zelfstandig naamwoord “leer”. Degene die de overtuiging leert, hoeft niet per se die overtuiging zelf toegedaan te zijn. Men kan dus spreken van leer in objectieve zin—de verwoording van een leerstuk—en van leer in subjectieve zin—de verwoording van een leerstuk om haar te onderwijzen. De kerk gelooft wat zij leert en leert wat zij geloof, en dat dus in de kerk het begrip leer in subjectieve zin gebruikt wordt. Leerstukken en ethische standpunten worden in de regel van elkaar onderscheiden. Deze studie beweert echter dat zowel verklaringen over ontologische werkelijkheden als verklaringen betreffende morele verplichtingen gezien kunnen worden als “leerstukken”. Gereformeerde belijdenisgeschriften, m.u.v. catechismussen, zijn vaak te kort over onderwerpen van een ethische aard. M.b.t. leerstukken kan men onderscheid maken tussen zaken die expliciet door de Schrift geleerd worden en zaken die impliciet door de Schrift geleerd worden. Er zijn ook leerstukken die gebaseerd zijn op de Schrift, maar niet de enige mogelijke uitleg vormen. In Nederlandse kringen

spreekt men dan van *theologoumena*. *Theologoumena* horen niet thuis in belijdenissen. Omdat het belijden van de kerk een proces is, zullen niet alle leerstukken die expliciet of impliciet door de Schrift geleerd worden in belijdenissen staan. Datgene wat in de belijdenisgeschriften te vinden is, zou men "kerkelijke leer" kunnen noemen. Sommigen noemen het "dogma".

Belijdenissen worden omschreven als uitdrukkingen van geloof en opsommingen van leer. Voor sommigen is dit een dilemma: is geloof niet subjectief en leer objectief? Vanuit de Schrift wordt bewezen dat geloof en leer, hoewel niet hetzelfde, inderdaad over hetzelfde kunnen gaan. Als zij inhoudelijk gelijk zijn, is de vraag terecht welke voorop gaat: geloof of leer. Het begint allemaal begint met de leer van de Schrift, datgene wat de Schrift onderwijst. Dat resulteert in geloof. Geloof, op zijn beurt, brengt beleden leer voort. Beleden leer kan op zijn beurt geloof opwekken, en zo ontstaat de kringloop: geloof wekt leer op en leer wekt geloof op.

De kerk is de gemeenschap van gelovigen. Zij is de plaats waar geloof, zowel *fides qua* als *fides quae*, gemeenschappelijk is. De kerk is ook pilaar en bolwerk van de waarheid: zij verkondigt de leer van de Schrift en handhaaft haar. Gezien het feit dat geloof en leer rechtstreeks met elkaar verbonden zijn, is het betoog van deze studie dat geloof en leer elkaar opwekken in het milieu van de kerk. Goddelijke openbaring is verkondigd en wekt geloof op. Geloof wordt door de kerk verwoord, o.m. om haar door te geven middels onderwijs. Het product van dit verwoorden heet "leer". Deze leer is normatief voor hen die onderwijs geven in dienst van de kerk.

Vragen die nog een antwoord verdienen, zijn: kunnen geloof en leer veranderen en wat houdt het in om geloof en leer te handhaven? Goddelijke openbaring, of de leer van de Schrift, is consequent. Deze eigenschap verplaatst zich echter niet naar geloof en (menselijke) leer. Vanwege het menselijk element kunnen geloof en leer inconsequent zijn. Omdat de Schrift hun norm is, kunnen geloof en leer gewijzigd worden. Kun je dan nog wel spreken van handhaving van geloof en leer? Dit is misleidend. Een kerk die *semper reformanda* is "handhaaft" haar overtuigingen en onderwijs niet, maar "conformeert" deze voortdurend aan de norm, namelijk de goddelijke openbaring.

3.3 Belijden en Belijdenissen

Nadat gekeken is naar randzaken die te maken hebben met belijden en binding aan de belijdenis en naar de context of het milieu waarin deze functioneren, wordt aandacht geschonken aan de kwestie belijden en belijdenissen. Daarbij wordt een min of meer logisch pad gevolgd, door te beginnen met het definiëren van het abstracte begrip "belijden" en af te sluiten met een voorstel over hoe een concreet definiërend belijdenisgeschrift vandaag geschreven zou kunnen worden.

"Belijden" betekent in het openbaar een geloofsovertuiging uiten. De term "belijden" kan verwijzen naar de daad van belijden (in de zin van professie) of naar het onder woorden gebrachte verslag van dat belijden (in de zin van belijdenis). Onderzoek van de achterliggende Hebreeuwse en Griekse termen in de Schrift maakt duidelijk dat in de Schrift "belijden" meer is dan het neutrale "in het openbaar uiten van een geloofsovertuiging". Belijden draagt de connotatie van doxologie met zich mee.

Aangezien "belijden" een werkwoord is, heeft het een onderwerp (subject). Het historisch onderzoek toont aan dat verschillende antwoorden gegeven zijn op de vraag wat dit onderwerp is. Deze studie stelt dat het onderwerp van belijden de kerk als verbondsgemeenschap is. Legitiem is slechts het onderscheid tussen hen die de verantwoordelijkheid van dit belijden kunnen dragen en zij die dat niet kunnen. Er is dus geen onderscheid tussen wat de kerk belijdt en wat haar leden belijden.

Aangezien "belijden" overgankelijk gebruikt kan worden, moet het ook mogelijk zijn het lijdend voorwerp (object) aan te wijzen. Op dit punt bestaat ook verschil van mening. Hoewel verschillende begrippen te distilleren zijn uit de debatten die omschreven worden in het historisch deel, maak ik duidelijk dat deze begrippen niet helder gedefinieerd waren in de debatten, waardoor bezinning op dit punt moeilijk is.

Sommigen beweren dat het lijdend voorwerp “geloof” is, terwijl anderen kiezen voor “leer”. Dit is een vals dilemma, het kan beide zijn: alle beleden geloof is leer en alle beleden leer is geloof.

Soms zijn de vragen gesteld of belijdenissen *theologoumena* bevatten, waar men dan over van mening mag verschillen en of alles wat in de belijdenis staat ook getypeerd kan worden als “kerkleer”, sommigen spreken dan van “dogma”. De vragen zijn echter onjuist. “Kerkleer” is per definitie alles wat in de belijdenis staat. Het is mogelijk dat *theologoumena* “kerkleer” worden door een plek in de belijdenis te krijgen. Kerkrechtelijk gezien is het dan bindend, maar inhoudelijk zou het dat niet moeten zijn. Deze inconsistentie blijft het debat over binding aan de belijdenis bemoeilijken.

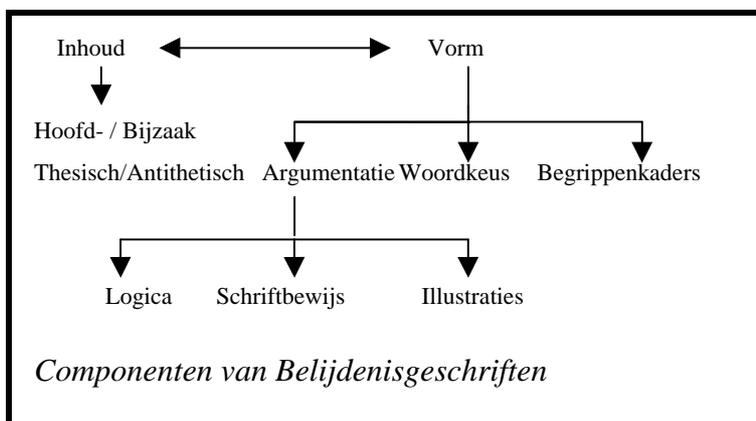
Tenslotte, sommigen beweren dat het lijdend voorwerp van belijden “leven” is (“de werkelijkheid bij de belijder”), terwijl andere kiezen voor “waarheid” (“de werkelijkheid die beleden wordt”). Er zijn hier twee benaderingen. Ten eerste is er het vraagstuk of belijdenissen een kwestie van ethiek of van kennis zijn. Dit is een vals dilemma, want belijden heeft te maken met zowel ontologische werkelijkheid als ethische verantwoordelijkheid. De tweede benadering is moeilijk onder woorden te brengen. Het gaat min of meer over het vraagstuk of belijdenissen een kwestie zijn van subjectieve ervaring of van objectieve kennis. Dit is enigszins te vergelijken met *fides qua* tegenover *fides quae*. Ook hier is het dilemma vals: in deze benadering vormen leven en waarheid geen contrast, maar bestaan ze naast elkaar en gaan soms zodanig samen dat ze min of meer een eenheid zijn.

Na aandacht gegeven te hebben aan het begrip “belijden” en haar grammaticaal onderwerp en lijdend voorwerp, wordt vervolgens aandacht geschonken aan het proces waardoor het abstracte belijden een concrete belijdenis wordt.

Belijden wordt op verschillende manieren getypeerd. Aangaande de inhoud worden belijdenissen gezien als een herhaling van, of een antwoord op de Schrift. Soms wordt dit ten onrechte gezien als een dilemma. Belijden wordt ook getypeerd als de presentatie van een volledige lijst van noodzakelijke leerstukken, of als een samenvatting van goddelijke openbaring. Deze typeringen zijn onjuist, omdat ze ervan uitgaan dat de belijdenis een totaaloverzicht heeft van de bron van belijden. Dat is onmogelijk, omdat die bron goddelijke openbaring is. De voorkeur wordt gegeven aan de volgende typering van belijden: het verwoorden van de hoofdzaak van goddelijke openbaring.

Belijden krijgt vorm op meer manieren dan slechts door belijdenisgeschriften. Er bestaan symbolen of credo’s, confessies, catechismussen, leerregels, liturgische documenten en leerbesluiten van kerkelijke vergaderingen. Zelfs preken zijn een vorm van belijden. M.b.t. al deze documenten en momenten van belijden is het nuttig om onderscheid te maken tussen drie lagen van gezag. De eerste laag is gezagvol omdat daar de hoofdpunten van belijden verwoord zijn. De tweede laag is richtinggevend omdat het de hoofdpunten van belijden toepast. De derde laag is persoonlijk van aard. De kerk tekent haar belijden op, omdat zij zo haar katholiciteit in de tijd tot uitdrukking kan brengen en omdat zij daarmee haar goddelijke opdracht tot belijden vervult.

Bij bezinning op belijden en binding aan de belijdenis maakt men vaak onderscheid tussen verschillende componenten van een belijdenis-geschrift. In de regel kunnen deze onderverdeeld worden in “vorm” en “inhoud”, waarbij deze weer verder ingedeeld kunnen worden, zoals blijkt uit het bijgevoegde schema. Bij bezinning over binding aan de belijdenis houdt men zich vaak bezig met het vaststellen van de grenzen tussen de verschillende componenten en hoe dit zich verhoudt tot trouw aan de



belijdenis. Zulke onderscheidingen zijn niet zo bruikbaar en nuttig als vaak wordt gedacht. Vooral het onderscheid vorm-inhoud is onduidelijk. Elke component, m.u.v. illustraties, heeft een inhoudelijke kant die gewogen moet worden.

Aangezien belijdenisgeschriften bestaan, is de vraag gepast welke functies zij vervullen. Een empirisch onderzoek maakt duidelijk dat belijdenisgeschriften voor allerlei doeleinden gebruikt worden. Deze functies kunnen schematisch als volgt worden weergegeven:

Doxologisch	Verklarend	Definiërend
	- Kerygmatisch	- Verenigend
	- Didactisch	- Apologetisch
	- Paracletisch	- Anti-heretisch

In de praktijk blijkt dat van alle belijdenisgeschriften geëist wordt dat ze al deze functies vervullen. Vanwege hun vorm, meestal historisch bepaald, zijn belijdenisgeschriften niet altijd even geschikt voor alle functies waarin zij moeten dienen. De getrokken conclusie is dat het misschien raadzaam is om de inhoud van de belijdenisgeschriften in vormen te gieten die doxologische, verklarende en definiërende doeleinden kunnen dienen.

Sommigen bestrijden het idee dat belijden vastgelegd mag worden in belijdenisgeschriften. Toch kan dit wel. Ten eerste is het belijden van de kerk gemeenschappelijk, dus heeft het individu het recht om te weten wat de gemeenschap belijdt. Ten tweede vervult belijden zodanige functies, dat vastlegging noodzakelijk is. Het lied van de kerk moet gezond zijn, haar onderwijs zuiver, haar grenzen helder.

Een ander discussiepunt is de vraag hoe belijdenisgeschriften gelezen moeten worden. Zij hebben hun wortels in de Schrift, zij zijn gegroeid in een historische context en zij functioneren als volwassen planten in een andere historische context. Deze studie laat zien dat alle drie de contexten—Schrift, historische oorsprong en hedendaags functioneren—een rol dienen te spelen. Wel moet een kerk in het opstellen van belijdenissen zo dicht mogelijk bij de Schrift blijven en zoveel mogelijk meervoudige uitleg van haar belijden voorkomen.

Omdat belijdenisgeschriften vaak gedateerde documenten zijn, worden vaak de vragen gesteld hoe relevant belijdenissen zijn en in hoeverre hun relevantie een rol speelt in hun functioneren. Een belijdenis dient altijd relevant te zijn, zowel in de context waarbinnen zij opereert als aangaande de belijder (de kerk en haar leden) die haar geloven. De context waarbinnen de belijdenis opereert is tweevoudig, namelijk de troon van God en de wijde wereld. Gezien de context van Gods troon moeten ook onderwerpen die niet meteen in de belangstelling staan, beleden worden. Gezien de context van de wijde wereld moet de kerk haar opdracht niet ontlopen om zich Schriftuurlijke leer eigen te maken en daarvan te getuigen m.b.t. onderwerpen die wel in de belangstelling staan.

Er is veel debat over het gezag van een belijdenis. Belijdenissen hebben op de eerste plaats gezag, omdat zij gebaseerd zijn op de Schrift. Daarbij is wel van belang te erkennen dat een belijdenis niet rechtstreeks afgeleid is van de Schrift. Het geloof van de mens staat er namelijk tussen. Daarom is het gezag van een belijdenis niet alleen verbonden aan de Schrift, maar ook aan het geloof van de belijder, de kerk. Door beleden inhouden te verwoorden, zich eigen te maken en te aanvaarden, geeft de kerk belijdenisgeschriften gezag. Een moeilijkheid hier is het feit dat bestaande belijdenisgeschriften niet voldoen als definiërende belijdenissen. Bestaande belijdenissen bevatten *theologoumena*, zijn te breed bij de behandeling van sommige onderwerpen en te eng m.b.t. andere. Bestaande belijdenisgeschriften staan dus niet boven alle kritiek. Er moet waardering zijn voor hen die geprobeerd hebben te onderscheiden wat wel en wat niet gezagvol is in een belijdenis. De problemen die op dit gebied bestaan, maken des te duidelijker dat de inhoud van de belijdenissen opnieuw vormgegeven moet worden.

Het voorgaande roept de vraag op of belijdenisgeschriften wel gewijzigd mogen worden. De kerk is geroepen om te belijden, dus moet er ruimte zijn voor zowel het reduceren en wijzigen van belijden, als voor het opstellen van nieuw belijden. Criteria voor zulke wijzigingen zijn de functie die het te belijden leerstuk moet vervullen en het inhoudelijk gewicht van datgene wat beleden

moet worden. Historische documenten laten zich echter niet gemakkelijk wijzigen. Men kan hier of daar een zin wijzigen, maar het toevoegen van artikelen of verwijderen van artikelen zou te ver gaan.

Het is daarom raadzaam om het geheel aan belijdenisinhouden die de kerk heeft in een nieuwe vorm te gieten die zo min mogelijk historisch gebonden is, en zich dus beter leent voor redactie en uitbouw. Een “Standaard Confessie” zou ontworpen kunnen worden om de definiërende functie te vervullen en dat doxologische en didactische belijdenisgeschriften geschreven worden uitgaande van deze definiërende belijdenis (hoewel zo’n belijdenis ook zijn oorsprong kan hebben in nieuw doxologisch of didactisch belijden). Omschreven wordt hoe zo’n belijdenisgeschrift eruit zou zien en hoe zo iets tot stand kan komen in een kerk met de structuur van de Dordtse kerkorde.

3.4 Ondertekening

De laatste stap in deze studie is die van bezinning op binding aan de belijdenis of ondertekening. Begonnen wordt met het abstracte begrip “binden” en via verscheidene kwesties wordt de weg afgereisd naar de praktijk van ondertekening en handhaving. Een lastige factor in dit stadium is dat een bezinning ontwikkeld wordt langs twee lijnen. Enerzijds moet rekening gehouden worden met de autonomistische context van vooral de GKN(v) en CGKN, alsmede het bestaan van de Oecumenische Symbolen en Drie Formulieren van Eenheid. Anderzijds wil deze studie laten zien hoe een meer connectionalistische benadering zou werken en wil het kijken naar binding aan een definiërende belijdenis zoals eerder omschreven. Overigens is zo’n tweesporen benadering niet nieuw: deze bestond al in de debatten tussen Da Costa en Groen van Prinsterer. Omdat juist bij het ondertekenen knopen doorgehakt moeten worden, wordt omschreven hoe de verschillende aspecten hun plek hebben in die twee contexten.

“Binden” betekent twee of meer dingen aan elkaar vastmaken. In de context van deze studie gaat het om het verbinden van kerkleden met het belijden van de kerk. De Nederlandse term “ondertekenen” en het Engelse “*subscription*” zijn niet precies equivalent. Wat de Nederlanders “binding aan de belijdenis” noemen, is voor de Engelsen “*subscribing a confession*”. Dit gebonden zijn aan de belijdenis houdt o.m. in het je eigen maken van de belijdenis. Je zou ook kunnen spreken van “je bewegen langs de lijnen van of in de weg van het belijden van de kerk”.

Er zijn drie doelen van binding aan de belijdenis te noemen. Ten eerste is een verklaring van instemming met de belijdenis van de kerk een openbare belijdenis van persoonlijke overtuigingen en een persoonlijke verklaring van geloof. Ten tweede is het een expliciete erkenning van en belofte om te blijven bij de belijdenissen in ambtelijke activiteit. Ten derde waarborgt het de katholiciteit en eenheid van de kerk in de tijd.

Een crux in discussies over binding aan de belijdenis is de grens tussen binding en tolerantie. Binding aan de belijdenissen van de kerk is een juiste manier is om aan de Schriftuurlijke oproep te voldoen om het geloof, eens voor altijd overgeleverd aan de heiligen, vast te houden. Er zal echter altijd een mate van tolerantie moeten zijn; die tolerantie wordt meestal aangeduid met de uitdrukking “vrijheid van profetie”. De grens tussen binding aan de belijdenis en profetische vrijheid is niet gemakkelijk te trekken. Idealiter ligt ze tussen de eerste en tweede laag van belijden. Maar omdat in de praktijk de inhoudelijke grens en de vorm van de grens niet samenvallen, is het zeer moeilijk om deze lijn precies aan te wijzen. In belijdenisgeschriften kan deze lijn ook nog eens getrokken worden m.b.t. exegese, presentatie, en dogmatiek. Dat compliceert deze kwestie. Ten slotte is deze grens verschillend voor verschillende soorten mensen in de kerk.

“Binden” is een werkwoord met zowel een lijdend als een meewerkend voorwerp. Het meewerkend voorwerp krijgt eerst aandacht. Omdat een belijdenis inhoudelijk ontstaan is vanuit de Schrift, kan er theoretisch gezien geen verschil zijn tussen binding aan de Schrift en binding aan een belijdenis. Als er spanning is tussen de twee, gaat binding aan de Schrift altijd voor. Door middel van een empirische analyse kan onderscheiden worden tussen zes manieren waarop iemand

gebonden kan zijn aan de belijdenis: letterlijke binding, inhoudelijke binding, hoofdzakelijke binding, systematische binding, gedifferentieerde algehele binding, en houdingsbinding. Men hoort gebonden te zijn aan alle belijdende uitspraken van de kerk die tot de eerste laag behoren. Dit betekent dat, naast het ondertekenen van de zes belijdenissen, de gereformeerden in Nederland ook óf een manier moeten ontwikkelen voor het ondertekenen van de leerdelen van liturgische formulieren en leeruitspraken van de meerdere vergaderingen, óf hun belijdenisinhoud moeten wijzigen om de leerdelen en -uitspraken hierin te zetten. In de huidige context zou een gedifferentieerde algehele binding de voorkeur hebben, in een context met een definiërende belijdenis is een inhoudelijke binding correct.

Nadat het meewerkend voorwerp van binding is omschreven, wordt vervolgens gelet op het lijdend voorwerp. Wie moeten gebonden worden aan het belijden van de kerk? Kerkleden zijn gebonden aan de inhoud van het belijden van de kerk voorzover zij deze kunnen begrijpen. Ambtsdragers zijn op gelijke wijze gebonden. Wel is hun binding gedetailleerder, gezien de dienst die zij vervullen in de kerk. Deze binding is weer verschillend voor de verschillende diensten. Ook zij die de kerken dienen in een didactische dienst maar geen ambtsdrager zijn, horen gebonden te worden aan de belijdenissen.

Hoe zou het gezag van binding aan de belijdenis omschreven kunnen worden? Deze vraag krijgt aandacht vanuit een theoretisch en een praktisch perspectief.

Het geloof van een persoon krijgt vorm door goddelijke openbaring. De persoon is gebonden aan zijn persoonlijke belijdenis want inhoudelijk weerspiegelt dit goddelijke openbaring. Gebonden zijn aan een belijdenis berust vervolgens op het feit dat *de kerk* deze belijdenis heeft. Op horizontaal vlak kan men het argument van het sociaal verdrag toepassen—er is een gemeenschappelijke overeenkomst om deze te houden. In verticale richting is de inwoning van de Geest in de kerk van belang—de Geest leidt de kerk in Christus' wegen. Tenslotte, binding aan de belijdenis is afhankelijk van de persoonlijke toestemming om aan het belijden van de kerk gebonden te zijn. Met andere woorden, het gezag van binding aan de belijdenis kent drie elementen: het heeft gezag omdat de belijdenis inhoudelijk de Schrift als bron heeft, omdat de kerk haar auteur is en omdat iemand er persoonlijk voor kiest en zich committeert. Bij dit laatste speelt het persoonlijk geweten dus een rol. Pogingen om het gezag vanwege de kerk uit te spelen tegen het gezag vanwege de persoon die gebonden wordt gaan niet op. Er is ook aandacht in dit kader voor het *quia-quotenus* debat. Dit debat is vanaf het begin verkeerd begrepen omdat, logisch gezien, een *quia*-positie altijd een *quotenus*-positie is. Wat een debat had moeten zijn over de gronden voor binding aan de belijdenis werd een debat over de vraag in hoeverre de belijdenissen de Schrift weergeven. De termen *quia* en *quotenus* kan men beter vermijden in discussies over binding aan de belijdenis omdat ze alleen maar verwarring veroorzaken.

Empirische analyse maakt voor de praktijk van binding aan de belijdenis duidelijk dat er drie organen zijn voor de uitvoering van binding aan de belijdenis: de nationale kerk (kerkelijke of federatieve binding), de regionale of plaatselijke kerk (regionaal-gemeentebinding), en het individu (individuele binding—in feite geen binding). Een combinatie van kerkelijke binding en regionale-gemeentebinding zou de meest juiste praktijk zijn. Er zijn elementen in het belijden van de kerk die altijd en overal relevant zijn en elementen die meer beperkt zijn. De praktische gevolgen van deze benadering kunnen, voor zover deze niet wenselijk zijn, beperkt worden. Het verhaal zou veel eenvoudiger zou zijn als belijdenissen in hun structuur duidelijk zouden maken wat wel en wat niet bindend is.

Hoe kan binding het best in praktijk worden gebracht? In principe is er geen verschil tussen mondelinge binding, eenvoudige binding, en binding middels een formulier. De meer gedetailleerde versie van ondertekening ontstond waarschijnlijk met het oog op de eenheid van de kerk. Zij heeft haar oorsprong in een context van twijfel, wantrouwen en onduidelijkheid. Gedetailleerde ondertekening is nuttig om de eenheid, heiligheid, katholiciteit en apostoliciteit van de kerk te waarborgen. Vanaf het begin (Nicea) is hiervoor gebruik gemaakt van een handtekening. Daar is niets mis mee. Het is niet nodig om ook de kerk te laten tekenen, want

binding aan de belijdenis is geen kwestie van een contract, maar van een eed. Verder, het is voldoende en raadzaam om ambtsdragers en kerkelijk werkers hun erkenning en beloften onder woorden te laten brengen middels bevestigingseden. Ook is het voldoende als predikanten het ondertekeningsformulier slechts één keer ondertekenen in een bepaald kerkverband, waarbij de classis de meest voor de hand liggende vergadering is. Gezien de huidige praktijk waarin ambtsdragers een termijn lang hun ambt vervullen, is het juist dat ouderlingen en diakenen (en andere kerkelijk werkers) hun gebondenheid aan de belijdenis aangeven aan het begin van hun ambtstermijn. Geconcludeerd wordt dat gereformeerde kerken er goed aan doen om het gebruik van ondertekeningsformulieren in plaatselijke kerken te laten vervallen en de inhoud hiervan te verwoorden in de ambtsbevestigingseden. Tenslotte, er bestaat in sommige gereformeerde kerken het gebruik om leden van en adviseurs aan de breedste vergadering van de kerk expliciet hun gebondenheid aan de belijdenis te laten verwoorden. Deze praktijk komt niet overeenkom met haar historische oorsprong—een getuigenis van de kerk aan de wereld—zij is bovendien onnodig, omdat leden van kerkelijke vergaderingen geloofsbriefen moeten indienen. De praktijk mag daarom vervangen worden door een terugkeer naar een getuigenis van de kerk aan de wereld.

Is een persoon eenmaal gebonden aan de belijdenis, dan moet die binding ook gehandhaafd worden. Bij deze zaak zijn allerlei vragen te stellen.

In kerkelijke kringen wordt voor de procedure om een lid van de kerk die zich niet als een gelovige gedraagt te vermanen de term “tucht” gebruikt. “Zich als een gelovige gedragen” betekent onder meer het vasthouden van de leer van de Schrift. Tucht dat hiermee verband houdt, wordt “leertucht” genoemd. Leertucht wordt toegepast als iemand tegen zijn binding in handelt. De term *gravamen* gaat over een bezwaar van de meest ernstige soort tegen een belijdenis. Een *gravamen* kan bij de kerken ingediend worden om de belijdenissen te wijzigen. De termen “schorsing” en “afzetting” verwijzen naar tuchtmaatregelen tegen een ambtsdrager als hij tegen zijn binding in handelt. De term “schorsing” wordt ook wel gebruikt voor een maatregel die geen verband houdt met tucht. Het zou beter zijn om dan te spreken van “tijdelijke ontheffing van het uitoefenen van het ambt”.

Het ondertekeningsformulier van 1619 lijkt heel strikt te zijn over in hoeverre beleden leer besproken mag worden in de kerk. Er zijn pleidooien geweest voor een vorm van een theologisch “laboratorium” waar “fouten” gemaakt zouden mogen worden zonder gevolgen. Zo’n laboratorium inderdaad aan te bevelen. Zo iets zou vorm kunnen krijgen middels een tijdschrift met een gesloten lidmaatschap en strenge auteursrechtelijke afspraken, de coetus en een gesloten internet forum.

Als zulke discussies mogelijk zijn, dan moet men wel duidelijk maken wanneer men de grens van binding aan de belijdenis overschrijdt. Iemand is een overschrijder is van trouw aan de belijdenis:

1. Wanneer een persoon met opzet iets belijdt dat ingaat tegen de gemeenschappelijk aanvaarde belijdenis.
2. Wanneer een persoon, met of zonder opzet, iets belijdt dat ingaat tegen de gemeenschappelijk aanvaarde belijdenis in een milieu waar of op een wijze die oneer doet aan de naam van de kerk en/of haar leden in verwarring brengt.

Wie moet de grenzen van binding aan de belijdenis bewaken? Omdat het belijden eigendom is van de kerk en de kerk binding eist, is het antwoord eenvoudigweg: de kerk. De wijze waarop men aankijkt tegen het vraagstuk autonomisme-connectionalisme bepaalt welke vergadering dit zal zijn. Het pleidooi van deze publicatie is voor meer invloed van de classis in plaats van de genabuurde kerk. Ook maakt het zich sterk voor het recht van meerdere vergaderingen om leertucht te beoefenen.

Over allerlei praktische vragen moet dan nog nagedacht worden. Enkele conclusies daarbij zijn de volgende. Lopende een leertuchtzaak er meer ruimte moet komen voor overleg en discussies. Er dient ruimte te zijn voor een eerste en tweede appel tegen een veroordeling, niet meer. Gedurende het eerste appel wordt het oorspronkelijke oordeel niet uitgevoerd, voorafgaand aan het tweede appel wel. Het is in het verleden voorgekomen dat ambtsdragers beschuldigd van ontrouw aan de

belijdenis als rechters fungeerden in hun eigen zaak; dit is volkomen onjuist. Echter, in tegenstelling tot de rechtsgang in de civiele samenleving hebben zij die verdacht worden van ontrouw aan de belijdenis geen recht tot zwijgen. Dit proefschrift omschrijft ook hoe leertucht beoefend zou kunnen worden bij hen die niet in een dienst van de kerk dienen.

4. Conclusie

Deze studie geeft aandacht aan twee vragen:

1. *Welke standpunten m.b.t. binding aan de belijdenis hebben vanaf 1816 bestaan binnen de Nederlandse gereformeerde traditie en welke aspecten van binding aan de belijdenis hebben expliciet aandacht gehad?*
2. *Welke systematische aspecten kunnen afgeleid worden van de discussies over binding aan de belijdenis binnen de gereformeerde traditie in Nederland, hoe verhouden deze aspecten zich tot elkaar, en hoe zou men binding aan de belijdenis doeltreffend kunnen regelen?*

De voorgaande paragrafen 2 en 3 geven het antwoord op deze vragen weer. Ter afsluiting van deze studie wordt aandacht gevestigd op een aantal zaken die om verdere bezinning vragen en worden voorstellen gedaan m.b.t. tot belijdenissen en binding aan de belijdenis. Puntsgewijs kunnen deze als volgt samengevat worden.

1. Er zijn veel lessen uit de geschiedenis van deze zaak te leren. Een bepaald aspect te veel benadrukken en eenzijdigheid voert tot ontsporing. Het is noodzakelijk om het geheel te overzien en niet te verdrinken in details. Leuzen uit het verleden—met name “onbekrompen en ondubbelzinnig”—zijn door hun gebruik onbruikbaar geworden om vandaag een positie aan te duiden. Tevens leert de geschiedenis dat deze kwestie zeer gevoelig ligt, het belijden van de kerk is de hartslag van de kerk.
2. Meer bezinning is nodig op het vraagstuk wat de gevolgen dienen te zijn voor de zonden van ketterij en dwaling. Hoe tolerant mag de kerk zijn?
3. Waar ligt de grens van de kerk? Als men stelt dat deze samenvalt met het belijden van de kerk en men tegelijk het belijden van de kerk of onderdelen daarvan relativeert, is het niet geboden om het belijden van de kerk te herzien? En zou de kerkelijke kaart van Nederland er niet anders uit moeten zien?
4. De belijdenis kan men het beste omschrijven als een *norma normata semper normanda*. Meer aandacht voor het *semper normanda* zou meer bereidheid creëren voor het bijstellen van het belijden van de kerk.
5. Er dient bezinning te komen vanuit niet-theologische wetenschappen op het fenomeen belijden en binding aan de belijdenis.
6. Het werkwoord “handhaven” past niet bij de leer en het belijden van de kerk. Het is het geloof dat de Schrift leert wat gehandhaaft moet worden, het belijden van de kerk dient dus voortdurend aan de Schrift geconformeert te worden.
7. Er zou meer aandacht moeten zijn voor het herzien en uitbouwen van het belijden van de kerk. Daartoe zou een nieuw belijdenisgeschrift geschreven moeten worden, dat als standaard kan dienen, en afgeleid daarvan belijdenissen die doxologische en didactische doeleinden kunnen dienen.
8. Bestaande belijdenisgeschriften bevatten een grijs gebied als het gaat om wat wel en wat niet bindend is. Er moet veel meer aandacht zijn voor het feit dat kerkelijke vergaderingen bepalen hoe met de belijdenisinhouden omgegaan dient te worden, ook als het gaat om dit grijs gebied.
9. Het aanscherpen van de bevestigingsvragen voor ambtsdragers en afschaffing van het ondertekeningsformulier op lokaal niveau verdient aanbeveling. Tevens is het voldoende als voorgangers de belijdenis enkel ondertekenen bij de aanvang van hun dienst in een verband van kerken.

Dutch Summary

10. Als een ambtsdrager iets uitdraagt wat haaks lijkt te staan op de belijdenis van de kerk zal, bij de kerk nadrukkelijk aandacht moeten hebben om goed helder te krijgen wat de ambtsdrager precies uitdraagt. Daarbij moet ook aandacht gegeven worden aan de intenties waarmee de ambtsdrager zijn leer uitdraagt.
11. Lopend dit verhaal zijn een aantal kerkordeartikelen ontworpen, een ondertekeningsformulier, en ambtsbevestigingsvragen. Deze teksten, te vinden in bijlage 3, zouden kunnen dienen als iets concreets om de reglementaire aspecten van dit onderwerp te leren kennen. Bijstellen van deze teksten zou kunnen bijdragen aan het komen tot een meer bevredigende praktijk van binding aan de belijdenis.

Ter afsluiting, dit onderzoek wijst er op dat het mogelijk is om een helicopterview van deze materie te krijgen. Dit onderzoek laat ook zien hoe complex deze materie is. Het is mijn bede dat deze studie anderen zal aanzetten tot studie, om zo de kerk van dienst te zijn bij de handhaving van het geloof, eens voor altijd aan de heiligen overgeleverd. En dat alles om God te eren door zijn grote daden te verkondigen.

Appendix I: Abbreviations

Abbreviations of Bible books are those as used in the *New King James Version* (London: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1979-1980).

AKS-[YEAR]	<i>Akkoord voor Kerkelijk Samenleven</i> —Accord for Ecclesiastical Community—with the year of introduction (church order of the NGK)
AR-[YEAR]	<i>Algemeen Reglement</i> —with the year of introduction (church order of the NHK)
ASC	<i>Algemeen Synodical Commissie</i> —General Synodical Committee
BC	Belgic Confession
CA	Classical Association
CAGK	<i>Christelijk Afgescheidene Gereformeerde Kerk</i> —Christian Seceded Reformed Church (1837-1869)
CB	Classical Board
CBK	<i>Commissie voor de Beginselen van Kerkorde</i> —Committee for the Principles of Church Order
CCS	<i>Commissie voor Contact en Samengaan</i> —Committee for Contact and Union
CK	<i>Commissie voor Kerkorde</i> —Committee for Church Order
CO-[YEAR]	Church Order—with the year of introduction
CoD	Canons of Dort followed by chapter number in Roman numeral and article number in Arabic numeral.
CV	<i>Confessioneele Vereeniging</i> —Confessional Association
DKE	<i>Deputaten Kerkelijke Eenheid</i> —Deputies Ecclesiastical Unity
ECPV	<i>Evangelisch-Confessioneele Predikantenvereniging</i> —Evangelic-Confessional Ministers' Association
GKN	<i>Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland</i> —Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (1892-2004)
GKN(HV)	<i>Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (Hersteld Verband)</i> —Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (Restored Association)
GKN[s]	<i>Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (synodaal)</i> —Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (synodical) (= GKN in period 1944-2004)
GKN(v)	<i>Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (vrijgemaakt)</i> —Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (liberated) (1944-)
GS	General Synod (often followed by place name and year, sometimes with the church)
HC	Heidelberg Catechism
HC LD ##	Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day ##
HC q&a ###	Heidelberg Catechism question and answer ###
HHK	<i>Hersteld Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk</i> —Restored Dutch Reformed Church (2004-)
NDGK	<i>Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Kerken</i> (Nether-Dutch Reformed Churches)
NGK	<i>Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken</i> —Netherlands Reformed Churches (1972-)
NHK	<i>Nederlands Hervormde Kerk</i> —Dutch Reformed church (1816-2004)
NM	National Meeting (often followed by place name and year, it always concerns the NGK)
PB	Provincial Board
PS	Provincial or Particular (Regional) Synod (often followed by region referred to, year held in, and place held)
RCC	Roman Catholic Church
REX	<i>Reglement op het Examen</i> —Regulations for Exams
RG	<i>Reglement op het Godsdiensonderwijs</i> —Regulations for Religious Education
ROT	<i>Reglement voor Opzicht en Tucht</i> —Regulations for Supervision and Discipline
FS-[YEAR]	Form of Subscription—with the year of introduction
SoW	<i>Samen op Weg</i> —Travelling Together
SRK	<i>Synodaal Reglement voor Kerkeraden</i> —Synodical Regulations for Church Councils
vGKN	<i>Voortgezette Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland</i> —Continued Reformed Churches in The Netherlands
WC	Westminster Confession

Appendix II: List of Persons

Note: where dates are given but no source, the dates have been drawn from church handbooks or the digital catalogue used by Dutch libraries and accessible via internet. Where references to church handbooks are mentioned, the page references contain an *In Memoriam* of the person in question.

Name	First Initial(s)	Dates	Reference
à Brakel	W.	1635-1711	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:48-51
à Kempis	T.	1379-1471	<i>LTKirche</i> , 9:1532
Acontius	J.	1520-1566/7	
Alingh Prins	J.	182?-1885/6	Van Alphen, 1885:181
Arminius	J.	1560-1609	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:33-37
Arntzen	M. J.	1912-	
Augustine		350-430	<i>Enc. Rel.</i> , 1:520-527
Augustijn	C.	1928-	
Austin	J. L.	1911-1960	<i>CDPhil</i> , 54
Barger	G.	1817-1877	<i>BLGNP</i> , I:38-39
Baron van Lynden van Sandenburg	C. T.	1826-1886	<i>NNBW</i> , IV:937
Barth	K.	1886-1968	<i>Enc. Rel.</i> , 2:68-71
Bavinck	H.	1854-1921	<i>BLGNP</i> , I:42-45
Beets	N.	1814-1903	<i>BLGNP</i> , III:32—36
Bekker	B.	1634-1698	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:53-57
Benthem Reddingius	G.	1774-1844	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:31-33
Berkhof	H.	1914-1995	<i>BLGNP</i> , V:48-51
Berkhoff	A. M.	1885-1944	<i>BLGNP</i> , VI:33-35
Berkouwer	G. C.	1903-1996	<i>BLGNP</i> , V:51-55
Beza	T.	1519-1605	<i>CE</i> (3), 189-190; <i>Enc. Chr.</i> , 1:231-232
Bilderdijk	W.	1756-1831	<i>BLGNP</i> , V:60-65
Boer	G.	1913-1973	<i>BLGNP</i> , V:74-76
Bonnet	G.	1723-1805	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:78-80
Boonstra	J.	1883-1956	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:39-40
Borneman	N.	1793-1865	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:41
Borsius	J.	1802-1857	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:85
Bos	G.	1935-	
Broes	W.	1766-1858	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:63-65
Brouwer	B. J.		
Brouwer	P. W.	1760-1834	<i>BWPGN</i> , I:654-657
Brummelkamp	A.	1811-1888	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:74-77
Brümmer (Bruemmer)	V.	1932-	
Busken Huet	C.	1826-1886	<i>BLGNP</i> , III:66-68
Buskes	J. J.	1899-1980	<i>BLGNP</i> , V:102-104
Calvin	J.	1509-1564	<i>Enc. Rel.</i> 3:31-34
Capadose	A.	1795-1874	<i>BLGNP</i> , V:109-111
Chantepie de la Saussaye	D.	1818-1874	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:118-121
Chantepie de la Saussaye	P. D.	1848-1920	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:89-92
Clarisse	J.	1770-1846	<i>BLGNP</i> , V:112-117
Cocceius	J.	1603-1669	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:92-98
Comrie	A.	1706-1774	<i>BLGNP</i> , III:76-78
Cramer	J.	1833-1895	<i>NNBW</i> 4:467

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Name	First Initial(s)	Dates	Reference
Da Costa	I.	1798-1860	<i>BLGNP</i> , III:85-88
Dankbaar	W. F.	1907-2001	<i>Jaarboek van de Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde</i> , 2001: 51-61 (http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_jaa004200101_01/_jaa004200101_01_0005.htm)
Daubanton	F. E.	1853-1920	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:157-158
De Boer	E. A.	1957-	
De Cock	H.	1801-1842	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:129-132
De Gier	K.	1915-1999	
De Hoest	G.		
De Jong	H.	1932-	
De Jongh	Z.	1774-1850	<i>BWdN</i> , IX:204
De Kanter	H. P.	1800-1868	<i>NNBW</i> , III:666
De Knijff	H. W.	1931-	
De Labadie	J.	1610-1674	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:293-302
De Liefde	J.	1814-1869	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:306-308
De Moor	B.	1709-1780	<i>BLGNP</i> , III:273-276
De Reuver	R.	1959-	
De Savornin Lohman	A. F.	1837-1924	
Dekker	W.	1950-	
Delprat	D.	1758-1841	<i>BWPGN</i> II:431-434
Den Hartogh	G. M.	1899-1959	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:183-184
Den Hertog	G. C.	1949-	
Den Ouden	J. H.	1786-1864	<i>BLGNP</i> , V:400-401
Dermout	I. J.	1777-1867	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:114-116
Diermanse	J. M. R.		
Diest Lorgion	E. J.	1812-1876	<i>BLGNP</i> , I:64-65
Doddridge	P.	1702-1751	<i>DNB</i> , V:1063-1069
Doedes	J. I.	1817-1897	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:169-172
Doekes	L.	1913-1997	<i>BLGNP</i> , VI:65-66
Donker Curtius	H. H.	1778-1839	<i>BLGNP</i> , V:144-146
Douma	J.	1931-	
Elout van Soeterwoude	P. J.	1805-1893	<i>BLGNP</i> , VI:71-73
Engelberts	N. J.	1831-1918	<i>Voorgangers</i> , 2:90-92
Erasmus	D.	1466?-1536	<i>CE</i> (3), 514-516
Erastus	T.	1524-1583	<i>LTKirche</i> , 3:738
Escher	D. A.		
Fanoy	A. J.	1894-1968	<i>Jaarboek GKN[s]</i> , 1969:476-478
Feith	H. O.	1813-1895	<i>NNBW</i> , I:852-853
Fiolet	H. A. M.	1920-	<i>CE</i> (3), 574
Francken	W.	1822-1894	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:136-137
Fransen van Eck	C.	1764-1830	<i>BLGNP</i> , VI:81-
Geach	P. T.	1916-	<i>BDTCP</i>
Geelkerken	J. G.	1879-1960	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:206-209
Geense	H. W.		
Gevers	M. B. H. W.		
Gezelle Meerburg	G. F.	1806-1855	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:219-220
Godfrey	W. R.		
Gomarus	F.	1563-1641	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:220-225
Goodricke	H.	17?? - 1784	Mentioned in <i>DNB</i> , VIII:137
Goossens	G.		
Graafland	C.	1928-2004	
Greijdanus	S.	1871-1948	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:152-155
Griffioen	S.	1941-	
Groen van Prinsterer	G.	1801-1876	<i>BLGNP</i> , III:147-151

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Name	First Initial(s)	Dates	Reference
Gunning jr.	J. H.	1829-1905	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:165-173
Haitjema	T. L.	1888-1972	<i>BLGNP</i> , VI:107-110
Heldring	O. G.	1804-1876	<i>BLGNP</i> , III:172-176
Hendriksz	D.	1766-1840	<i>BWPGN</i> , II:680—681
Heringa Ezn.	J.	1765-1840	<i>BLGNP</i> , III:181-185
Hillenius	C.	1568-1632	<i>BWPGN</i> , IV:34-37
Hoedemaker	P. J.	1839-1910	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:198-202
Hoekstra Bzn.	S.	1822-1898	<i>BLGNP</i> , V:242-245
Hofstede de Groot	P.	1802-1886	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:248-251
Holtius	N.	1693-1773	<i>BLGNP</i> , III:187-189
Hodge	C.	1797-1878	<i>EDT</i> , 561
Hooijer	C.	1803-1873	<i>BLGNP</i> , V:260-261
Houtzagers	J. H.	1857-1940	<i>BLGNP</i> , III:190-192
Hugenholtz	P. A. C.	1790-1868	<i>Repertorium</i> , 1:107
Hugenholtz	P. H. (sr.)	1796-1871	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:265
Hugenholtz	P. H. (jr.)	1834-1911	<i>BLGNP</i> , V:267-269
Hugenholtz	P. R.	1821-1889	<i>BLGNP</i> , V:269-271
Hus	J.	1372-1415	<i>Enc. Rel.</i> , 6:535-536
Huydecoper	T. C. R.	1805-1866	<i>BLGNP</i> , III:193
Janse	A.	1890-1960	<i>BLGNP</i> , V:285-288
Janssen	J. D.	1775-1848	<i>BLGNP</i> , III:199-200
Junius	F. J. J. A.	1809-1879	<i>NNBW</i> , VI:868-870
Kamphuis	J.	1921-	<i>CE</i> (3), 924
Kamphuis	B.	1950-	
Kant	I.	1724-1804	<i>CDPhil.</i> , 398-403
Knipscheer	F. S.	1871-1955	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:257-258
Koelman	J.	1631-1695	<i>BLGNP</i> , III:212-219
Koenen	H. J.	1809-1874	<i>BLGNP</i> , III:219-221
Kohlbrügge	H. F.	1803-1875	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:284-288
Kraemer	H.	1888-1965	<i>BLGNP</i> , I:104-111
Krieger	W. L.	1749-1822	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:264-265
Kuenen	A.	1828-1891	<i>BLGNP</i> , 270-274
Kuitert	H. M.	1924-	<i>CE</i> (3), 1067-1068
Kuyper	A.	1837-1920	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:276-283
Laurillard	E.	1830-1908	<i>BLGNP</i> , III:242-244
Le Roy	J. J.	1771-1850	<i>NNBW</i> , X:843
Ledeboer	L. G. C.	1808-1863	<i>BLGNP</i> , III:245-248
Lobrij	N.	1766-1818	<i>BLGNP</i> , I:131
Locke	J.	1632-1704	<i>DNB</i> , XII:27-36
Luther	M.	1483-1546	<i>Enc. Chr.</i> , 3:345-348
Luti	J. J. L.	183?-1888/9	Van Alphen, 1888:253
Mackay	A.	1838-1909	<i>NNBW</i> , V:334-335
Maurice of Orange (Stadholder)		1567-1625	Rowen, <i>Princes of Orange</i> , 32-55.
Meijers	S.	1928-	
Melanchthon	P.	1497-1560	<i>Enc. Chr.</i> , 2:489-490
Meyboom	L. S. P.	1817-1874	<i>BLGNP</i> , I:181
Meyer Brouwer	L.	1786-1872	<i>NNBW</i> , X:152
Molenaar	D.	1786-1865	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:328-329
Moorrees	B.	1780-1860	<i>BLGNP</i> , I:193-194
Muntinghe	H.	1752-1824	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:337-339
Mul	D. J.		
Muurling	W.	1805-1882	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:339-341
Nauta	D.	1898-1994	<i>BLGNP</i> , VI:204-206
Napoleon	B.	1761-1821	<i>Enc. Brit.</i>

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Name	First Initial(s)	Dates	Reference
Oosterhoff	L. E.	1915-1975	<i>Informatieboekje NGK</i> , 1975-76:193.
Opzoomer	C. W.	1821-1892	<i>NNBW</i> , VI:1080-1082.
Pareau	L. G.	1800-1866	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:358-361
Philip II of Spain		1527-1598	<i>Enc. Brit.</i>
Pierson	A.	1831-1896	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:361-364
Plantinga	A.	1932-	
Ploos van Amstel	J. J. A.	1835-1895	<i>BLGNP</i> , III:295
Polman	A. D. R.	1897-1993	<i>BLGNP</i> , V:408-410
Praamsma	L.	1910-1984	<i>Voorgangers</i> , 5:113-114.
Prins	J. J.	1814-1898	<i>BLGNP</i> , V:413-414
Rauwenhoff	L. W. E.	1828-1889	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:363-366
Repelaer van Driel	O.	1759-1832	<i>NNBW</i> , III:1071-1072
Ridderbos	H. N.	1909-	
Ritschl	A.	1822-1889	<i>Enc. Rel.</i> 12:403-405
Roëll	H. A.	1653-1718	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:372-374
Roëll	W. F.	1767-1835	<i>NNBW</i> , IX:871-872
Royaards	H. J.	1794-1854	<i>NNBW</i> , V:616
Rutgers	F. L.	1836-1917	<i>BLGNP</i> , I:303-304
Rutgers van der Loeff	A.	1808-1885	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:375-377
Ryle	G.	1900-1976	<i>CDPhil</i> , 704-705
Schilder	H. J.	1916-1984	<i>BLGNP</i> , VI:278-280
Schilder	K.	1890-1952	<i>BLGNP</i> , I:314-318
Schleiermacher	F. D.	1768-1834	<i>Enc. Rel.</i> , 13:108-113
Schokking	H.	1874-1941	<i>BLGNP</i> , I:319-320
Scholte	H. P.	1805-1868	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:390-393
Scholten	J. H.	1811-1885	<i>BLGNP</i> , I:320-322
Scholten	P. J.	1875-1946	<i>BLGNP</i> , V:387-389
Schotsman	N.	1754-1822	<i>BLGNP</i> , VI:282-283
Schultens	J. J.	1716-1778	<i>BLGNP</i> , I:334-335
Secretan	J. C. I.	1797-1875	<i>BLGNP</i> , I:338-339
Sepp	C.	1820-1890	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:397-399
Severijn	J.	1883-1966	<i>BLGNP</i> , III:328-329
Singendonck	J. A.	1809-1893	<i>NNWB</i> , VIII:1284
Steenblok	C.	1894-1966	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:414-415
Stinstra	J.	1708-1790	<i>BLGNP</i> , III:345-347
Stoop	J. A.	1813-1891	<i>BLGNP</i> , I:361
Te Water	W.	1698-1764	<i>BLGNP</i> , III:391-392
Telder	B.	1897-1980	<i>Informatieboekje NGK</i> , 1981:126-128
Thoden van Velzen	S. K.	1809-1900	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:418-419
Tinholt	L.	1825-1886	<i>BLGNP</i> , V:510-511
Trigland	J.	1583-1654	<i>BLGNP</i> , III:355-358
Trimp	C.	1926-	
Uytenbogaert	J.	1557-1644	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:464-468
Valeton jr.	J. J. P.	1848-1912	<i>BLGNP</i> , III:360-365
Van Boneval Faure	R. T. H. P. L. A.	1826-1909	<i>NNBW</i> , VII:430-431
Van Deinse	A.	1764-1829	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:162-163
Van den Bergh	W.	1850-1890	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:60-62
Van den Heuvel	P.	1941-	
Van den Honert	J.	1693-1758	<i>BLGNP</i> , V:251-255
Van der Dussen	A.	1951-	
Van der Feen	Z. H.		
Van der Heyden	G.	1530-1586	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:243-246
Van der Kemp	C. M.	1799-1861	

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Name	First Initial(s)	Dates	Reference
Van der Kemp	D.	1731-1780	<i>BWPGN</i> , IV:697-700
Van der Leeuw	C.	1761-1825	<i>BWPGN</i> , V:690-691
Van der Marck	F. A.	1719-1800	<i>NNBW</i> , III:816-819
Van der Os	A.	1722-1807	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:353-355
Van der Tuuk	G.	1772-1845	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:432
Van der Ziel	A.	1903-1990	<i>Jaarboek GKN[s]</i> , 1991:486-487
Van Genderen	J.	1923-2004	<i>Jaarboek CGKN</i> , 2005:328-331
Van Griethuysen	T. J.	1818-1888	<i>NNBW</i> , VI:636
Van Hattem	P.	1645-1706	<i>BWPGN</i> , III:572-579
Van Hogendorp	D.	1797-1845	
Van Heusden	C. J.		
Van Leenhof	F.	1647-1712	<i>BLGNP</i> , V:334-337
Van Lingen	F. P. L. C.	1832-1913	<i>BLGNP</i> , I:126-128
Van Ommen	H.	1924-1999	<i>Informatieboekje NGK</i> , 2000:225-227
Van Oordt	J. F.	1794-1852	<i>BLGNP</i> , I:230-231
Van Oosterzee	H. M. C.	1806-1877	<i>BLGNP</i> , I:234
Van Oosterzee	J. J.	1817-1882	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:351-356
Van Raalte	A. C.	1811-1876	<i>BLGNP</i> , I:270-272
Van Rhee	J.	1789-1851	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:367-368
Van Ruler	A. A.	1908-1970	<i>BLGNP</i> , VI:262-264
Van Sliedregt	J.	1914-1973	
Van Toorenenbergen	J. J.	1822-1903	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:421-424
Van Velzen	S.	1809-1896	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:431-433
Van Voorst	J.	1757-1833	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:449-451
Van Zutphen	W.	1707-1794	<i>NNBW</i> , IX:1318-1319
Van Zuylen van Nyevelt	P. J.		
Venator	A. T.	ca. 1569 - 1618	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:433-435
Veleva	J. H.	1917-	
Veleva	W. H.	1929-	
Venema	H.	1697-1787	<i>BLGNP</i> , III:368-371
Verhoeff	J. C.	1821-1904/5	Van Alphen, 1886:150
Verhoeff	J. G.	1823-1909	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:435-436
Vijgeboom	J. W.	1773-1845	<i>BLGNP</i> , I:418-419
Visser	H. W. C. A.	1773-1826	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:438
Vlak	J.	1635?-1690	<i>BLGNP</i> , I:401-402
Vlijm	J. M.	1917-1999	
Voetius	G.	1589-1676	<i>BLGNP</i> , II:443-449
Volger	W.	1904-1980	
Vollenhoven	D. H. T.	1892-1978	<i>BLGNP</i> , V:542-545
Voltaire		1694-1778	<i>CDPhil</i> , 844
Volten	H.	1902-1966	<i>Jaarboek GKN[s]</i> , 1967:467-469
Vonk	C.	1904-1993	<i>BLGNP</i> , V:545-547
Vos	G. J.	1836-1912	<i>BLGNP</i> , III:386-389
Wagenaar	L. G.	1925-1998	
Watts	I.	1674-1748	<i>DNB</i> , XX:978-981
Weldijk	J.	1763-18??	<i>Repertorium</i> , I:275
Wetter	J. F.		
Weijland	H. B.	1928-1996	<i>BLGNP</i> , V:561-562
Wiersinga	H.	1927-	
William I of Orange (King)		1772-1843	<i>GWPE</i> (9), 24:587-588
William III of Orange (stadholder)		1650-1702	Rowen, <i>Princes of Orange</i> , 131-147.
William IV of Orange (stadholder)		1711-1751	Rowen, <i>Princes of Orange</i> , 163-185.

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Name	First Initial(s)	Dates	Reference
William V of Orange (stadholder)		1748-1806	Rowen, <i>Princes of Orange</i> , 186-229.
Willibrord		658-739	<i>CE</i> (3), 1879
Wiskerke	J. R.	1923-1968	<i>Handboek GKN(v)</i> 1969, 178-181
Witkop	J.	1808-1879	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:455-456
Witsius	H.	1636-1708	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:456-458
Wormser	J. A.	1807-1862	<i>BLGNP</i> , IV:462-465
Zaalberg	J. C.	1828-1885	<i>BLGNP</i> , VI:350-351
Zwingli	U.	1484-1531	<i>Enc. Rel.</i> 15:596-598

Appendix III: Proposed Texts

I believe my study adequately proves, both in the light of Scripture and in the light of the nature of communities, that confessional subscription is justified. There is always a line between what ought to be confessed and therefore binding and what ought not, a line which is not easily drawn and is often determined by context. However, there are clearly materials which belong to the set of binding doctrines and materials which belong to the set of *theologoumena*. Churches do well to reflect on this carefully, and to articulate their faith in the present context to meet present needs. This implies the writing and adopting of new confessional material.

The texts I have drafted for the church orderly and liturgical purposes will serve to indicate my conclusions with respect to the second question. I have drafted two sorts of texts. The first seeks to remain within the current polity as practised in the GKN(v). These texts presuppose the confessions to which one is to be bound to be the Ecumenical Creeds and the Three Forms of Unity, and they take the autonomist position with respect to the nature of broader ecclesiastical assemblies.

The second may be considered my “ideal” text. I have indicated that a prerequisite to practicable confessional subscription is the creation of a defining confession, a Confessional Standard, that may serve world-wide and be applied in particular contexts. I further believe that where it concerns doctrinal matters connectionalism is in keeping with the tradition of Dortian polity and is to be preferred to autonomism.

Where the two texts differ from each other, I have printed them alongside each other in two columns. The left column contains the text that could, I believe, be implemented in the GKN(v) now, the right column contains the text that should, in my opinion, ideally function. The left column might thus be considered to reflect a more autonomist approach, the right column a more connectionalist approach. While the left column will refer to existing confessional documents and the right column to the Confessional Standard, this has no consequences for the way the binding is articulated.

Church Order Article: The Confessing of the Church

A. Confessing

The church articulates its faith in confessional documents.

It belongs to the tasks of the general synod to fix the text of the Standard Confession of the [name of the association of churches]. In doing so it will involve the classes in first reading and the local churches and the sister churches in second reading. Once the text has been fixed, a confessional article is only adopted if 75% of the classes are in favour and if 75% of the synod members are in favour.

B. Binding to the confessing of the church

Members of the church are to express at their admission to communion their agreement with the doctrine confessed and taught by the church by means of the vows adopted for that purpose. Refusal to do so implies no admission to communion.

Those serving in one of the following

A. Confessing

The church articulates its faith in confessional documents.

It belongs to the tasks of the general synod to fix the text of the confessions of the [name of the association of churches]. In doing so it will involve the classes in first reading and the local churches and the sister churches in second reading. Once the text has been fixed, a confessional article is only adopted if 75% of the classes are in favour and if 75% of the synod members are in favour.

B. Binding to the confessing of the church

Members of the church are to express at their admission to communion their agreement with the doctrine confessed and taught by the church by means of the vows adopted for that purpose. Refusal to do so implies no admission to communion.

Those serving in one of the following

ministries in the local church—minister, elder, deacon, church labourer—are to express at their ordination their agreement with the doctrine confessed and taught by the church and are to promise to labour in keeping with this confessing by means of the vows adopted for that purpose. Refusal to do so implies no admission to the ministry.

Those serving in one of the following ministries also beyond the local church—minister, professor in theology—are to express when being admitted to this ministry their agreement with the doctrine confessed and taught by the church and are to promise to labour in keeping with this confessing by means of the form of subscription adopted for that purpose. Refusal to do so implies no admission to the ministry.

C. Gravamen

Members and those serving in a ministry in the church who hold or come to hold convictions contrary to the doctrine confessed and taught by the church shall not promote their views in a way detrimental to the church and its membership. If such an objector does not refrain from teaching his views, he is to submit a gravamen to the churches for consideration and examination.

In first instance the church council will examine the gravamen with the advice of classis deputies to see whether the substance of the gravamen indeed is not in keeping with the confessing of the church.

If the gravamen is upheld as not being in keeping with the confessing of the church, the gravamen will be judged according to God’s Holy Word by the church council with the advice of classis deputies.

If the church council finds the gravamen contrary to Scripture, the objector will be given time to reconsider his views to the end that he will recant his views or at least promise to refrain from teaching them. During this period the objector will be temporarily released from exercising his office. If he refuses to at least refrain from teaching his views he is deposed from office.

If the church council finds the confessions at fault, it will submit a gravamen to the general synod via the classis and regional synod.

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If the gravamen is upheld as not being in keeping with the confessing of the church, the gravamen will be judged according to God’s Holy Word by the classis with the advice of General Synod deputies.

If the classis finds the gravamen contrary to Scripture, the objector will be given time to reconsider his views to the end that he will recant his views or at least promise to refrain from teaching them. During this period the objector will be temporarily released from exercising his office. If he refuses to at least refrain from teaching his views he is deposed from office.

If the classis finds the confessions at fault, it will submit a gravamen to the general synod.

D. Charges of Confessional Unfaithfulness

Charges of confessional unfaithfulness may be brought against those serving in a ministry in the church. Charges against those serving locally may only be brought by members of the same local church. Charges against those serving beyond the local church may only be brought by members of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland.

When objections arise against the confessional faithfulness of someone serving in a ministry, the objector shall submit his objections to the church council that has supervision over the person's ministry.

If that church council, with the advice of classis deputies, upholds the objections, it shall request the accused to cease promoting his views in a way detrimental to the church and her membership. If the accused refuses to do so, his views shall be dealt with as a gravamen.

If, however, that church council, with the advice of classis deputies, does not uphold the objections, and the objector himself is not a member of the church in which the accused serves, the objector may submit his objections to his own church council together with the defence of the church council supervising the ministry of the accused.

Should the church council holding supervision over the objector, with the advice of classis deputies, come to a different conclusion from that of the church council supervising the ministry of the accused, the church council holding supervision over the objector shall submit its findings to the classis to which the church council supervising the ministry of the accused belongs.

The classis will then deal with this submission as if it were an appeal against the decision of the church council supervising the ministry of the accused.

(In the case of professors in theology, the term 'church council' is to be replaced with 'board of governors' and 'classis' with 'General Synod'.)

E. Inquiry

In relation to a gravamen, charges of confessional unfaithfulness, or for other well-founded reasons, an ecclesiastical assembly may conduct an inquiry into the convictions of

D. Charges of Confessional Unfaithfulness

Charges of confessional unfaithfulness may be brought against those serving in a ministry in the church. Charges against those serving locally may only be brought by members of the same local church. Charges against those serving beyond the local church may only be brought by members of the [name of the association of churches].

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E. Inquiry

In relation to a gravamen, charges of confessional unfaithfulness, or for other well-founded reasons, an ecclesiastical assembly may conduct an inquiry into the convictions of

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an office bearer.

The ecclesiastical assembly will ensure that it fully hears the office bearer(s) in question. Office bearers are to co-operate fully and openly in such an inquiry. Those who refuse to co-operate are to be deposed from their ministry.

F. Appeal

Those convicted by the church council of confessional and Scriptural unfaithfulness and therefore deposed have the right of appeal to the classis. During the course of this appeal the decision of the church council is stayed and the convicted office bearer is suspended from office.

If the classis denies the appeal, the decision of the church council is executed. The convicted office bearer has the right of appeal to the regional synod. During this appeal he shall abide by the decision of the church council, upheld by the classis.

G. Gravamen at Synod

When General Synod receives a gravamen from one of the church councils via a classis and regional synod, it will determine whether the objections raised against the confession are justifiable.

If General Synod upholds the gravamen, it will submit its decision to all classes for consideration.

If at least 75% of the classes agree with the decision of General Synod, the procedure for amending the confession is followed. If between 50% and 75% of the classes agree with the decision of General Synod, the matter is reconsidered by the General Synod and the classes. If after this second consideration still less than 75% of the classes are in agreement, the gravamen is denied.

The **admission vow** in question could be revised to read as follows:

First, do you accept the Old and the New Testaments as the only Word of God and hold fast to its teachings, which are confessed and taught here in this Christian Church, as the complete doctrine of salvation? Do you promise to abide by this doctrine through God's grace in life and death?

The **ordination vows** could be revised to read as follows:

First, do you feel in your heart that God Himself, through His congregation, has called you to this holy office/ministry?

Second, do you accept the Old and the New Testaments as the only Word of God and hold fast to its teachings, which are confessed and taught here in this Christian Church, as the complete

an office bearer.

The ecclesiastical assembly will ensure that it fully hears the office bearer(s) in question. Office bearers are to co-operate fully and openly in such an inquiry. Those who refuse to co-operate are to be deposed from their ministry.

F. Appeal

Those convicted by the church council of confessional unfaithfulness and by the classis of Scriptural unfaithfulness and therefore deposed have the right of appeal to the regional synod. During the course of this appeal the decision of the classis is stayed and the convicted office bearer is suspended from office.

If the regional synod denies the appeal, the decision of the classis is executed. The convicted office bearer has the right of appeal to the general synod. During this appeal he shall abide by the decision of the classis, upheld by the regional synod.

G. Gravamen at Synod

When General Synod receives a gravamen from one of the classes, it will determine whether the objections raised against the confession are justifiable.

If General Synod upholds the gravamen, it will submit its decision to all classes for consideration.

If at least 75% of the classes agree with the decision of General Synod, the procedure for amending the confession is followed. If between 50% and 75% of the classes agree with the decision of General Synod, the matter is reconsidered by the General Synod and the classes. If after this second consideration still less than 75% of the classes are in agreement, the gravamen is denied.

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doctrine of salvation? Do you promise to promote and defend this doctrine and do you reject all that conflicts with it, in keeping with your office/ministry?

Third, do you promise faithfully to discharge the duties of your office/ministry and to adorn the doctrine of God with a godly life?

Fourth, do you also promise to abide by the adopted Church Order and further ecclesiastical regulations and to submit to the discipline of the church in case you should become delinquent in doctrine or life?⁹⁷⁷

The **form of subscription** could be phrased as follows:

We, the undersigned, [task: ministers/professors in theology] in the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, acknowledge the Ecumenical Creeds and the Three Forms of Unity as well as the doctrinal sections of the liturgical forms of the said GKN to be in their substance fully in agreement with God's Holy Word, the only rule for life and faith. We hold that these confessions and documents serve adequately for the instruction in and defence of that Word. We consider them a testimony of our faith and they will serve as a guideline for our official ministry.

We promise therefore diligently to promote and faithfully to defend the doctrine confessed by the church without ever intentionally deviating from its substance and always in an endeavour to further the unity, sanctity, catholicity, and apostolicity of the church, all this in keeping with our office and calling.

We further promise to abide by the Church Order and associated regulations in effect in the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland.

Should we become otherwise convinced, or be considered to have become otherwise convinced, we will follow the stipulations and co-operate in the procedures laid out in the Church Order with respect to such situations.

We, the undersigned, [task: ministers/professors in theology] in the [name of the association of churches], acknowledge the Confessional Standard of the [name of the association of churches] to be in its substance fully in agreement with God's Holy Word, the only rule for life and faith. We hold that this standard and those derived from it serve adequately for the instruction in and defence of that Word. We consider it a testimony of our faith and it will serve as a guideline for our official ministry.

We promise therefore diligently to promote and faithfully to defend the doctrine confessed by the church without ever intentionally deviating from its substance and always in an endeavour to further the unity, sanctity, catholicity, and apostolicity of the church, all this in keeping with our office and calling.

We further promise to abide by the Church Order and associated regulations in effect in the [name of the association of churches].

Should we become otherwise convinced, or be considered to have become otherwise convinced, we will follow the stipulations and co-operate in the procedures laid out in the Church Order with respect to such situations.

The **declaration** issued by the general synod might be worded as follows:

The general synod of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland declares

That the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland hold fast the infallibility and absolute authority of God's Word as only rule for life and faith, as brought to expression in the Ecumenical Creeds and the Three Forms

The general synod of the [name of the association of churches] declares

That the [name of the association of churches] holds fast the infallibility and absolute authority of God's Word as only rule for life and faith, as brought to expression in her Confessional Standard.

⁹⁷⁷ The term office is to be used in the case of ministers, elders and deacons, the term ministry in the case of church labourers.

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of Unity.

As the most general assembly of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, we readily testify, that we heartily feel and believe, that the Ecumenical Creeds and the Three Forms of Unity are in its substance fully in agreement with God's Holy Word. As churches we promise therefore diligently to promote and faithfully to defend the doctrine confessed by the church without ever intentionally deviating from its substance and always in an endeavour to further the unity, sanctity, catholicity, and apostolicity of the church. We heartily welcome into our ecclesiastical community all those who share this faith with us.

May the King of the Church work and increase this faith in the hearts of many, and may those, who with us have received a dear faith, display the grace shown to them in the practice of communion, to the glory of Him, who prayed that all those who are His might be one.

As the most general assembly of the [name of the association of churches], we readily testify, that we heartily feel and believe, that the Confessional Standard, is in its substance fully in agreement with God's Holy Word. As church we promise therefore diligently to promote and faithfully to defend the doctrine confessed by the church without ever intentionally deviating from its substance and always in an endeavour to further the unity, sanctity, catholicity, and apostolicity of the church. We heartily welcome into our ecclesiastical community all those who share this faith with us.

May the King of the Church work and increase this faith in the hearts of many, and may those, who with us have received a dear faith, display the grace shown to them in the practice of communion, to the glory of Him, who prayed that all those who are His might be one.

Finally, I have indicated that questions relating to philosophy, anthropology, and law need to be further studied so to create a practice that will truly serve the churches well. I am aware that such study may result in other texts than those I have now proposed.

Those who do not dream do not live, my father would sometimes say to me. I realise full well that the foregoing study is way ahead of its time, if time should not prove it impracticable or too limited. The implementation of its conclusions is a dream. I hope it is a dream that inspires others to study the matter carefully, encourages them to dare to think aloud on this subject, and will eventually create a confessional apparatus that serves the church in its service to the Lord God, in whom the church believes and whom it confesses.

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Curriculum vitae

Roelf Christiaan Janssen was born on September 6, 1972 in Den Ham (gemeente Hellendoorn), The Netherlands. In 1982 he migrated to Australia. Graduating from John Calvin Senior Highschool (Armadale) in 1989, he entered a Bachelor of Arts programme at the University of Western Australia in Nedlands. Majoring in Ancient Greek and minoring in Ancient History, he received a BA degree in 1992. Travelling halfway around the globe he then followed a Masters of Divinity programme at the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches in Hamilton, Ontario. He received an MDiv degree in 1997. Thereupon he returned to his country of birth and entered a *doctorandus* programme. In the autumn of 1998 he succesfully defended a masters thesis entitled *Statisch of dynamisch? Kernmomenten uit de bezinning binnen de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland in de eerste helft van de achttiende eeuw op de binding aan de leer van de kerk via een binding aan een belijdenis (Static or Dynamic? Key moments in reflection within the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands in the first Half of the Eighteenth century with respect to binding to the doctrine of the church by means of binding to a confession)*.

Between the autumn of 1998 and the summer of 1999 he followed several courses at the Theologische Universiteit (Broederweg) with a view to becoming eligble for call in the *Gereformeerde Kerken (vrijgemaakt)*. On June 21, 1999, he was ordained to the ministry in the *GKN(v)* of Nagele. Soon thereafter he entered the PhD programme.

Roelf Janssen has served as assistant secretary for the International Conference of Reformed Churches between 1997 and 2002. In 2002 he was appointed to the committee for Relations with Church Abroad of the *Gereformeerde Kerken (vrijgemaakt)*. He has served in this capacity for two three-year terms, between 2005 and 2008 as its general secretary. He has guest-lectured at the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches and the Theologische Universiteit (broederweg), as well as taught an accredited course in Sweden on behalf of the Baltic Reformed Theological Seminary. He has authored a number of articles in various magazines and currently serves as editor of *Lux Mundi*, an English language publication of the committee for Relations with Churches Abroad of the *GKN(v)*.

In 2004 he was installed as minister in the *GKN(v)* of Hoek. During the course of the summer of 2009 he hopes to move to Canada, to take up a pastoral charge with the Canadian Reformed Church of Abbotsford, British Columbia.

He married with Berendina Annegina Akkerman on July 18, 2001. They have received four sons, Roy Kristian, Yannick William, Kylian Geert, and Nyls Owen.

Confessions outline what a church believes and teaches. As such they became instruments to safeguard the proclamation of the church, to keep its doctrine sound. Those ministering on behalf of the church were therefore required to subscribe the confessions.

Like many other churches in the world, Reformed Churches in The Netherlands have confessions. This study looks at various aspects of confessional subscription in the Dutch Reformed tradition since 1816. It consists of two parts. The first is a historical part, reviewing the key moments of reflection on confessional subscription between 1816 and 2004. The second is a systematic part, creating an overview of the various elements of confessional subscription, how these interrelate, and how confessional subscription might best be practiced.

Roelf C. Janssen is minister of the *Gereformeerde Kerk (vrijgemaakt)* of Hoek. He has studied at the University of Western Australia in Nedlands, the Canadian Reformed Theological College in Hamilton, and the Theologische Universiteit (Broederweg) in Kampen.