



Guidance on the Meaning of “Affirming the Confessions” Office of General Secretary

A number of members and assemblies in the CRC have asked, in the wake of Synod 2024’s decisions about gravamen, whether “full agreement” with the confessions allows any space at all for officebearers who are wrestling with particular doctrines. In some minds, the decisions of Synod 2024 have set an impossibly high bar for church leadership, one which leaves no room for even ordinary human musings about matters of faith.

The answer to this question requires some careful reflection on the meaning and purpose of our denominational covenants. Those purposes are expressed in a number of interrelated phrases from the Covenant for Officebearers and its supplemental material:

- From the Covenant itself: “We affirm three confessions...whose doctrines fully agree with the Word of God...,” “we promise to be formed and governed by them...” “should we believe that a teaching... is not the teaching of God’s Word, we will communicate our views to the church...”
- From the supplemental material: “affirms without reservation...” (A.1) “does not affirm that these doctrines are all stated in the best possible manner...” (A.2) “bound only to those doctrines that are confessed, and is not bound to the references, allusions,...” (A.3) “officebearers shall submit their difficulties...” (B.1)

Synod has not specified the relative weight to be given to those various phrases, so in many ways it falls to the local council (and classis, if there’s a question) to discern how to balance the various aspects of confessional adherence in the local church.

It is clear, from the advisory committee’s preamble and its primary recommendation, that Synod 2024’s main objective was to set a boundary at one end of the confessional subscription process (*Acts of Synod 2024*, p. 871). Thus, it is not possible for a CRC officebearer to serve with a permanent disagreement or settled conviction contrary to a doctrine contained in the confessions or a confessional interpretation (*Acts of Synod 2024*, p. 868-871). Officebearers with such disagreements or settled convictions must resolve them through the gravamina process (Church Order Art. 5-a, Supplement). Prospective officebearers must resolve them before serving. But Synod 2024 did not aim to close off every question that might naturally arise in the life of faith.

According to Synod 2024, local discernment is required to clarify whether an officebearer simply has a question or wondering about a confessional teaching, or whether the officebearer has an objection or disagreement that requires a gravamen. While such a process is not spelled out in the current synodical regulations, it is implied in the responsibilities of a council to offer

“counsel, examination, and judgment” (B.1). If a council has the authority to judge *when* a given officebearer has come into alignment after submitting to the gravamen process, it is only natural that a council should have the same authority to judge *whether* a given difficulty rises to the weightiness¹ of requiring a gravamen (see also example 2 in the preamble, *Acts of Synod 2024*, p. 868-869).²

This understanding aligns with the preamble to Synod 2024’s decisions on gravamina which states, “‘Judgement’ of a confessional-difficulty gravamen occurs when the council determines whether the officebearer’s difficulty is within or outside of confessional subscription” (*Acts of Synod 2024*, p. 870). This understanding is also in line with the response given by synod to Dr. Harry Boer where the study committee spoke of “unresolved questions, problems, and tensions” in the confessions (*Acts of Synod 1980*, p. 532-533) as well as the permissibility of disagreeing with the applicability of Scripture texts cited by the confessions (*Acts of Synod 1980*, p. 551-553).

The synodical regulations clearly explain that “without reservation” does not mean there is no room to express concerns about the implications of a doctrine, or about the way a particular doctrine has been stated or used by others in the church (B.2 and B.3). In practice, the CRC has adopted a “historical-critical” approach to the confessions, which recognizes that certain phrases can only be understood and applied today with an appreciation for their historical setting. Thus, for example, synod has in the past dismissed questions about references to the letter of Paul to the Hebrews (Belgic Confession Art. 4) or ascribing to the Anabaptists the “error” of condemning infant baptism (Belgic Confession Art. 34). Because our confessions are “owned” by a large number of Reformed churches, the CRC has preferred not to change them but to recognize that they were “born in a certain climate of theological debate and can best be understood in light of that history.” In doing this, synod warned against an “too literalistic approach to the Confessions” (*Acts of Synod 2002*, p. 499; *Acts of Synod 1959*, p. 184).³

Wrestling with questions of faith is a necessary and normal part of the Christian life (think of the psalms). Reading the decisions of Synod 2024 in light of the advisory committee’s preamble

¹ The Church Order’s use of the term, “gravamen” (coming from the Latin term *gravare*, meaning ‘to burden’), implies that officebearers’ confessional concerns must be weighty to be processed in this manner.

² This, in essence, is how Synod 1980 responded to Dr. Harry Boer’s gravamen: his concerns did not undermine the teaching of the Canons of Dort on reprobation. See especially *Acts 1980*, p. 533: “Possibly Dr. Boer thinks.... We are only saying that Boer, on the points at issue, has misinterpreted the Canons.”

³ Some of the issues determined not to be “weighty” enough to merit a change include concerns over the Belgic Confession’s omission of Lamentations and assertion that Paul wrote Hebrews, as well as its use of 1 John 5:7 as a trinitarian proof text and the reference to the removal of original sin by “baptism” (*Acts of Synod 1961*, p. 88 and pp. 205-212); the CRC’s understanding of reprobation (*Acts of Synod 1980*, p. 73-76); references to the “error of the Anabaptists” in the Belgic Confession (*Acts of Synod 2002*, p. 499 and *Acts of Synod 2023*, p. 991); and the phrase “he descended into hell” in the Apostles’ Creed (*Acts of Synod 2002*, p. 502-504). Other historic examples from the wider Reformed tradition are identified in the *Acts of Synod 2014*, p. 155 (note 33).

makes clear that there is no intention of undermining this important reality. In the end, the process of subscription must reflect a balance between two sets of considerations - "affirming without reservation" and "being bound only to those doctrines confessed." The boundary between those two phrases often requires discernment. This is why the gravamen process is designed to be pastoral (B.7). The process of "preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living" in conformity with the confessions begins with the officebearer's personal conscience, in conversation with those who know him or her best: the local council. This is not designed to offer "loopholes" for those who object to the CRC's doctrinal foundations, but rather to create space for genuine conversation about the truths we confess together in the Christian life. This process requires trust and vulnerability both from those wrestling with the nuances of faith, as well as from those who prefer settled clarity. It also recognizes that affirming the confessions (and the Scriptures from which they come) wholeheartedly and without reservation is, at times, as much an act of faith as understanding. But when handled well, the process of subscription - affirming together the confessions we believe - provides room for the CRC to grow together in our common witness to the Lord and his work in our world.

Therefore, those who have legitimate wonderings about the confessions, what they teach, the implications of those teachings, or who have concerns about the synodical process that led to those conclusions, can still in good conscience, sign the Covenant for Officebearers or make public Profession of Faith even if they continue to wrestle with such questions. However, officebearers in the church are, nonetheless, reminded that they are called to the high standard of their office when they covenant to not only believe, but also "promote" and "defend" the confessions and the doctrines and standards taught within them.