

## From confessing to confession: Discerning the season under heaven

*Paul T. Nimmo*

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### Introduction

At the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 2018, the Theological Forum was instructed to review the status and role of the Westminster Confession in the life of the Church,<sup>1</sup> an instruction given exactly fifty years after the General Assembly of 1968 had instructed the Panel on Doctrine to conduct a review with a remarkably similar remit.<sup>2</sup> While the earlier review did not lead to any change in the constitutional and legal status quo in respect of the confession,<sup>3</sup> it is unclear at the time of writing what the outcome of the current review will be – whether it will recommend the retention of the status quo, the adoption of an alternative confessional settlement, perhaps involving subscription to new or more or different confessional documents, or the pursuit of a more innovative or radical course of action. And, of course, it remains unclear how any such recommendation would be received.

The subject matter of such a review, however, can only be appreciated in its full depth and significance when its deeper theological context is explored and appreciated. With this in mind, the task of this article is to pose the question of whether a confession of faith is necessary at all in the church, and – if it is – to reflect upon how the church might discern when a *new* act of confession may be required. As a way of approaching these issues, the article first addresses the *wider act* of confessing in the church in a broad sense, in the conviction that it is within this broader context of general *confessing* that the role of a particular confession or confessions can fully be understood. Finally, the text of Ecclesiastes – ‘For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven’ – is recalled in order to aid consideration of the question of whether a new confession may be required.

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<sup>1</sup> For the details of the instruction given to the Theological Forum in this connection, see “Report of the Theological Forum”, in *Church of Scotland – General Assembly 2019* (Edinburgh: Church of Scotland Assembly Arrangements Committee, 2019), 19/02.

<sup>2</sup> See Finlay A. J. Macdonald, “The Westminster Confession: Unfinished Business”, *Theology in Scotland*, 23.2 (2016): 11. <https://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/TIS/article/view/1500/1142>

<sup>3</sup> Macdonald relates the subsequent history of the review and its aftermath in detail, *ibid.*, 11–18.

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This distinction between the *act* of confessing and the *text* of a confession is not intended to rule out that the two might – and often do – coincide. In the regular liturgy of some congregations, as well as in the special context of baptismal services, an *act* of confessing and the *text* of a confession may naturally coincide. Informally also, the two might fall together, as when a Christian is unexpectedly ambushed and required to answer the question of what Christians believe – ‘Well, one way of saying what Christians believe is to use the words of the Creed: I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth’. However, it is also evident that one could confess one’s faith *without* using the formal words of a confessional text: one can draw on many other sources to express one’s faith – one’s own testimony, a recent sermon, the work of Augustine, whatever .... And it is also clear that one could refer to a given confession of faith without any act of confessing taking place: one could simply recite a creed or confession without any existential commitment at all.

In what follows, this article first considers the perennial and perduring activity of *confessing* the Christian faith, and then moves to think in detail about the necessity of a specific *confession* of faith. It argues that in the movement from the one – confessing – to the other – confession – there lies the need to discern the season, not just on earth, but also under heaven.



### **Section One: On confessing**

The act of confessing is central to the life and identity of a Christian. Expressed the other way round: a Christian is considered *to be* a Christian precisely because – usually – they have undertaken or do undertake some act of confessing their faith.<sup>4</sup> For all the exceptions that certainly exist and are important, the general point remains valid that Christians – usually – identify as Christians *explicitly*. Of course such explicit identification can be occasional, timid, bashful, and quiet; or it can be consistent, proud, confident, and loud. And of course, there are many ways to express one’s faith, to identify as Christian. The point is that Christianity is not – under normal circumstances – a mystery or secret religion, but one that is explicitly visible and audible in the lives of its followers in the world.

Perhaps the most central and obvious means of identifying as Christian is what Scripture denotes as ‘confess[ing] with your mouth’ or ‘your lips’ – a verbal

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<sup>4</sup> The term ‘usually’ is used with good reason: the author is well aware of both the necessity and the complexity of speaking either of very young people or of those who have cognitive difficulties in this connection. Indeed, to consider these cases with appropriate respect and in appropriate detail would require another paper.

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confession of faith.<sup>5</sup> A whole array of texts in Scripture attests not only the centrality but also the significance of this act of confession. Jesus says: ‘Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven’ (Matthew 10:32; cf. Luke 12:8). Paul writes: ‘because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord [...] you will be saved. For [...] one confesses with the mouth and so is saved’ (Romans 10:9–10). And John writes: ‘every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God’ (1 John 4:2). The significance of confessing, of testifying, of witnessing, is central to the Gospel message.

How might one seek to capture or at least to characterise this act of confessing?

One might begin by noting that in each of the biblical verses just quoted, the tense of the verb is *present*: the act of confessing is an activity for here and now. It is neither an *ephapax* or once-for-all of the past, nor is it a deferral or ‘yet to come’ of the future. Rather it is an activity of the present, an act to which the Christian is called and called again. Any words spoken yesterday, in confessing of the past, cannot simply be repeated: in the present act of confessing, those words must be taken up anew, reinhabited, reinvested, reinvigorated. In the words of Otto Weber, then, ‘In essence, confession is an *event*, not a document’.<sup>6</sup>

But as well as being an *event*, the act of confessing is, second, also a *response*. It does not take place as a self-originating work with its roots in human initiative or capacity, or in human discovery or achievement. Rather, it arises only as a *responsive* act – specifically, in response to the preceding revelation of God in Jesus Christ. G. C. Berkouwer thus observes that confessing is ‘the answer to the proclamation of salvation’.<sup>7</sup> In Scripture, the aspect of revelation or salvation to which confessing responds is given diversely: in the texts cited a moment ago, it can be a confessing of Jesus Christ before others (Matthew 10:32; cf. Luke 12:8); of the Lordship of Jesus (Romans 10:9); of Jesus Christ come in the flesh as from God (1 John 4:2); but many other aspects of God’s work are also confessed in

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<sup>5</sup> Though it may be a tempting theological construct, it is ultimately difficult to believe that Karl Rahner is right to speak of ‘anonymous Christians’ [see *Theological Investigations*, vol. V, trans. Karl-Heinz and Boniface Kruger (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1969), 390–98; *Theological Investigations*, vol. XIV, trans. David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976), 280–94]; perhaps it is more helpful, with Karl Barth, to think of a non-Christian as a ‘*christianus in spe*’ – ‘a Christian in hope’ [*Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV, part 3, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1962), 810], that is, to think of them in the hope that non-Christians might yet one day become Christians.

<sup>6</sup> Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, vol. 1, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1981), 29.

<sup>7</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *The Church*, Studies in Dogmatics, trans. James E. Davison (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976), 306.

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Scripture.<sup>8</sup> In every case, however, the act of confessing is linked to the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Third, it is important to recognise that the act of confessing is *affective* – that is to say, it is not simply the detached declaration of the mind without feeling or emotion. It is not the dispassionate approval of a metaphysical schema or of a historical narrative. Instead, the act of confessing is self-involving, indeed *wholly* involving. The full quotation from Romans cited above runs: ‘if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and *believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead*, you will be saved. For *one believes with the heart and so is justified*, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved’ (Romans 10:9–10). Confessing is about far more than merely intellectual knowledge and understanding: confessing involves assent and trust, as well as praise and thanksgiving.<sup>9</sup> The writer of Hebrews renders this connection explicit: ‘let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name’ (Hebrews 13:15).<sup>10</sup> Confessing is a holistic and sacrificial act, emotive and impassioned, involving body and soul, mind and will, knowing and feeling.

And in this posture of full involvement, the Christian does not stand alone, for – and fourth – the act of confessing is a *corporate* act. Even when a Christian is most isolated, whether in reality or only in perception is irrelevant, still the act of confessing is not a solitary or individual affair. On the one hand, confessing is simply inconceivable without recognition of that great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1) on whose shoulders each Christian stands, those who through time and place – and often under the greatest of duress – have passed on the faith down the generations. On the other hand, confessing is not to be conceived without the present communion of saints of which the Christian is a part, the people of God among whom they take their place and among whom they are identified precisely in the event of the act of confessing.<sup>11</sup> In any event, the

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<sup>8</sup> In other texts in Scripture, the required confessing can be of Jesus as the Messiah (John 9:22); of ‘our hope’ (Hebrews 10:23); of the name of God (Hebrews 13:15); of the good news of the kingdom (Matthew 24:14); of the resurrection (Acts 4:33); of eternal life (1 John 1:2); of the Father sending the Son as the Saviour of the world (1 John 4:14); or of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus (Revelation 1:2, cf. Revelation 20:4) – and even this list may not be exhaustive.

<sup>9</sup> Berkouwer writes, ‘What is at issue is not simply a particular content of knowledge, but a testimony, a message, to which the witness, the confessor, is related with his own life’, *The Church*, 288.

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Weber notes that in the New Testament, ‘all confession is thankful, praising, self-committing acceptance of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ’, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, vol. 1, 29.

<sup>11</sup> One might wonder here on both counts about the lamentable neglect of All Saints’ Day in many parishes.

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Christian community exists as and where it confesses, and only there: the church does not live without this act of confessing.<sup>12</sup>

Fifth, the act of confessing is *eschatological*. To confess is to speak in hope: the writer of Hebrews declares, ‘Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful’ (Hebrews 10:23). It is this hope, that, in Berkouwer’s memorable turn of phrase, ‘forms the canvas for the confession’.<sup>13</sup> The act of confessing takes place in a world without true hope, scarred and afflicted by forces in opposition to God. Against this pessimistic backdrop, there is real danger inherent in the hopeful act of faithful confessing, and Scripture speaks bluntly of the risks attendant – from being thrown out of the synagogue (John 9:22), through being reviled, persecuted, and slandered (Matthew 5:11), to being slaughtered and beheaded (Revelation 6:9 and 20:4). Yet to confess in this context is not only to kindle a light of hope – however tentative – on a hill, but also to seek to herald the coming of the kingdom of God. It is to recognise the presence and work of God in this day while awaiting the full consummation at which point, Paul writes, ‘every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father’ (Philippians 2:11).

There is however one final observation to make about the act of confessing. Thus far, the act of confessing has been described as being present, responsive, affective, communal, and eschatological. But in each case, the context and direction of that act has been considered horizontally – as an act undertaken and perceived within the horizon of the world. And in truth, these diverse considerations are secondary to the primary consideration that undergirds them all. And that is that the act of confessing also takes place *under heaven*: it is an act undertaken by the power of God, in the service of God, and before the presence of God.

The act of confessing takes place by the *power* of God. Of themselves, Christians have no ability of their own to confess the salvation revealed in Jesus Christ. Not only does it lie on the other side of their limitations as creatures unable to conceive and bespeak the perfection of God; it also lies on the other side of their affliction as sinners who deny and oppose God at every turn. To confess, and to confess truly, requires the grace of God – the presence of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. The writer of 1 John observes – ‘By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God’ (1 John 4:2). And Paul consequently implores his readers, ‘Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join

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<sup>12</sup> Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, trans. John Newton Thomas and Thomas Wieser (London: Collins, 1961), 64.

<sup>13</sup> Berkouwer, *The Church*, 288.

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with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God' (2 Timothy 1:8). Without this power, there is no confessing.

Moreover, the act of confessing takes place in the *service* of God. The unequivocal desire of God, published throughout the New Testament, is that the message of salvation be proclaimed in all the world, and that – in the patience of God – there will be no final reckoning before this has been accomplished. So Jesus says, 'th[e] good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come' (Matthew 24:14).<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the act of confessing lies at the heart of any understanding of Christian vocation – it is not just the professional calling of the ordained cleric or professional theologian, but also the deepest vocation of every Christian.

And lastly, the act of confessing takes place before the *presence* of God. One of the biblical texts already mentioned is instructive here again: Jesus says, 'Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven' (Matthew 10:32; cf. Luke 12:8). At the same time as the Christian act of confessing proceeds here on earth, so there is an event in heaven also, in which Jesus Christ speaks for them before the Father. The immediate location of confessing is the mundane here and now; but the ultimate backdrop of confessing is to be conceived as the heavenly presence of God.<sup>15</sup> And before God, Christian confessing takes place either as obedience or as disobedience. The decision about what, and when, and how to confess, is thus a decision taken on earth, certainly, but also under heaven. It therefore requires careful, and prayerful, consideration.

The purpose of the above consideration of the act of confessing is the belief that it is only within this wider horizon that the particular events of confessing which lead to particular texts of confession can be fully understood. And it is to these particular instances of confession – and the underlying question of their necessity – that the second section turns.



### **Section Two: On Confession**

In the history of the Christian church, there have been regular occasions on which particular acts of confessing have generated statements of faith that have been formally set down and distributed for further use – *confessions* in a narrower

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<sup>14</sup> Precisely the mistreatment of followers of Jesus Christ is seen in Scripture as a chance to further the message of the Gospel: Jesus again says 'they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. This will give you an opportunity to testify' (Luke 21:12–13).

<sup>15</sup> Paul writes of the fact that 'you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God' (Galatians 4:9) – thus in the confession of their knowledge of God, so too Christians are known by God, the One who 'knows the secrets of the heart' (Psalm 44:21).



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sense. On such occasions, the act of confessing has become *reified*: it becomes a thing, a deposit of Christian expression, and for all that it remains connected to its origins, it takes on a life and career of its own. This kind of confession, then, represents a very particular mode of Christian speaking about God.

Such a Christian confession of faith typically has a number of different characteristics that might briefly be rehearsed. In content, it sets out a statement from the Christian community of the guiding doctrine and/or practice within that community – as well, regularly, as a rejection of what constitutes erroneous doctrine and/or practice. The material content is governed by the teaching of Scripture, and is thus often recognised to be open to revision or correction. The statement is usually approved and issued by a particular church or council, but even – and indeed precisely – in this particularly, it seeks to address the whole Christian church. And in terms of authority, the confession as a statement of Christian belief and practice is intended to be *ministerial*, serving the church, rather than *magisterial*, ruling the church. Finally, regarding purpose, the confession is – in the words of Karl Barth – ‘always recognized as [...] action necessary for the time, undertaken and carried through for the sake of the good order and the up-building of the community of God on earth’.<sup>16</sup>

Hermann Bavinck notes that such confessions go back as far as the early days of the church: ‘Almost from the outset’, he notes, ‘the church has been a confessional church’.<sup>17</sup> From the original ‘rule of faith’ through its elaboration in baptismal confessions and apostolic creeds, to the extensive confessional documents of the Reformation era and beyond, history demonstrates that acts of confessing have purposefully reified into texts of confession for wider and ongoing use.<sup>18</sup> In practice at least, then, Christian churches in history seem at regular points to have found it desirable – and perhaps necessary – to move from act to text.

It should be noted that the tendency to reify confessing as confession is a particularly prominent feature of the Reformed churches. Michael Allen observes in this connection: ‘Reformed churches confess. And to aid in this endeavor, they write confessions that will guide this vocal testimony’.<sup>19</sup> In this writing, the

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<sup>16</sup> Karl Barth, *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920–1928*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (London: SCM, 1962), 116.

<sup>17</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. IV, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2008), 420.

<sup>18</sup> In passing, it is worth noting Bavinck’s observation that there is a tendency over time to expansion and elaboration in respect of the results of this reification (see *ibid.*).

<sup>19</sup> R. Michael Allen, *Reformed Theology* (London: T&T Clark International, 2010), 144.

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churches are guided by Scripture – Scripture alone! – as they write confessions that in turn serve to guide and direct the churches.<sup>20</sup>

Within the Reformed tradition, one might further observe that the canon of confessions remains defiantly and explicitly open.<sup>21</sup> After the initial rush of confessions in the sixteenth century (including the Scots Confession), there was a further spate of confessions in the seventeenth century (including the Westminster Confession), and then a subsequent flood of confessions in the twentieth century. There is, as a corollary, no one or universal Reformed confession, but rather a great diversity of confessions among the Reformed churches. Indeed, the Reformed were caricatured very early as being ‘Confessionists’ – though ironically they embraced the term, declaring in 1581 that ‘it is a far more excellent thing to bear a name of confessing the faith, than of denying the truth’.<sup>22</sup> Each distinct Reformed church in each particular place has tended to desire to set out for itself a particular confession of faith, to go its own way in setting its confessional bounds. This is not a matter of caprice, however; rather, Eberhard Busch suggests, it derives from the Reformed sense of being ‘a wandering people of God’ – to be Reformed is ‘to be open to the direction of the Spirit’<sup>23</sup> – and that means to the Spirit in each time, each place, each context, ever under the recognition that the Spirit is the Spirit of the very same Word that is heard in Scripture.

Yet for all such openness to the Spirit and desire to be faithful to Scripture in its confession, it should nonetheless be observed that *all* church confessions of faith are human documents, provisional and fallible in content, and open to abuse in promulgation and implementation.

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<sup>20</sup> Bavinck correspondingly posits that ‘The confession is not a statement alongside of, let alone above, but far below Scripture [and] remains examinable and revisable by the standard of Scripture’, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV:420f. Thus the Reformed confessions cite and reference Scripture regularly, and on occasion explicitly subordinate themselves to Scripture – the preface of the Scots Confession, for example, states: ‘if any man will note in this our Confession any article or sentence repugning to God’s holy word, that it would please him of his gentleness, and for Christian charity’s sake, to admonish us of the same in writ; and We of our honour and fidelity do promise unto him satisfaction from [God’s] holy Scriptures, or else reformation of that which he shall prove to be amiss’, in *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century*, ed. Arthur C. Cochrane (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), 165.

<sup>21</sup> By contrast, for the Lutheran churches, there is no genuine process of confessional innovation or development after the collection of documents found in the Book of Concord was completed in 1580. Since that time, no further Lutheran confessions have been written, and the original sixteenth-century confessions remain definitive – although one might note the participation of (at least some) Lutherans in a series of subsequent ‘declarations’, such as the Barmen Declaration (1934), and the Joint Declaration on Justification (1999).

<sup>22</sup> “Preface” to *The Harmony of Protestant Confessions of Faith*, ed. Peter Hall (London: John F. Shaw, 1842), xxxi.

<sup>23</sup> Eberhard Busch, *Reformiert: Profil einer Konfession* (Zürich: TVZ, 2007), 33.



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For one thing, confessions are documents of human hands in a concrete location at a concrete moment. It has already been noted that human beings can only speak of God by grace; their works are therefore inevitably products of creation and are tainted by sin. As Bavinck observes, confessions are thus ‘subordinate, fallible, the work of humans, an inadequate expression of what the church has absorbed from Scripture as divine truth’.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, as – in the words of John H. Leith – ‘a particular community’s understanding of the Christian faith at a particular time and place’,<sup>25</sup> they are vulnerable to being open to and influenced by the pressures of that context and its modes of thinking. The need out of which a confession arises is never replicated in precisely the same way again, and no confession is able to anticipate every possible future need. Moreover, a confession is unavoidably expressed in the language and idioms of its context, and stamped – explicitly or implicitly – by the relevant state of knowledge in respect of matters of history, philosophy, and science. A confession is a deeply time-bound and sin-bound statement of the faith of the church.

For another thing, confessions are documents wielded – the harsh term is sadly necessary – by human beings. In this connection, Emil Brunner notes three consequent *dangers* of confessions. First, there is the danger of turning any confession or dogma into an absolute in itself, which would lead to ‘a dangerous over-emphasis on the authority of the Christian community and its ecclesiastical organization as the guarantee of Truth’.<sup>26</sup> Second, there is a danger of setting a confession up ‘as the actual *object* of faith’; indeed, Brunner observes, ‘The transference of faith from the dimension of personal encounter into the dimension of factual instruction is the great tragedy in the history of Christianity.’<sup>27</sup> In passing, it might not be fanciful to seek aspects of both these dangers realised in the history of the church in Scotland. And finally, there is the danger of the church resorting to the powers of the state to enforce confessional conformity.<sup>28</sup> These dangers are also not merely dangers at a human level: if the testimony of Scripture is taken seriously, these dangers relate also to those powers – earthly and worse – which seek to test and defeat the witness of the church.

If such limitations and dangers are taken seriously, and the vulnerability of each and every confession is recognised, there may arise a desire to question the

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<sup>24</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV:421.

<sup>25</sup> John H. Leith, *An Introduction to the Reformed Tradition: A Way of Being the Christian Community* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), 129.

<sup>26</sup> Emil Brunner, *Dogmatics*, vol. I: *The Christian Doctrine of God*, trans. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949), 52.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, I:53f.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, I:58f. The words of Bavinck are also worth noting here: ‘The church does not coerce anyone with this confession, nor does it fetter research, for it leaves everyone free to confess otherwise and to conceive the truth of God in some other sense’, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV:421.

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necessity or even the desirability of a confession. And yet an anti-confessionalism which rejects the need for any confession seems in truth as poorly justified and as practically disastrous as a hyper-confessionalism which claims particular confessions to set forth unadulterated divine truth.

For it seems that there is indeed a real sense in which confessions are both desirable and necessary. Primarily, they function to set up a normative account of Christian belief and practice in the world that both instructs the church and informs the world, serving, in Brunner's words, 'to express the true faith, and to fix a standard of doctrine'.<sup>29</sup> The confession is not an independent account, for it is subordinate to Scripture; it is not an infallible account, for it is open to revision and rejection; and it is not a magisterial account, for it is called to serve and not to rule. But it is a constructive summary of Christian belief and practice, which seeks to respond in obedience to the calling of the Spirit in the service of the Gospel under the demand for an account of the faith from within and outwith the church.

Even – indeed, precisely – in their limitation, these deeply time-bound and sin-bound texts point to the God who rules over time and sin. And it is in reliance upon the grace of God that the confessions may find their purpose and their vocation fulfilled. The necessity of such confession, of its pointing beyond and away from itself, derives from the circumstances in which the church exists, in a created world still menaced by sin and chaos and awaiting its final redemption. One might, then, construe the necessity of confession as one of *emergency* rather than of principle: confessions are necessary because of the times in which Christians live.

This view is not without support. Bavinck observes that 'in a world immersed in lies and deception, a church cannot exist without a rule of faith'.<sup>30</sup> Or again, Stotts suggests that for the Reformed tradition, 'developing and adopting confessions is indeed an obligation, not an option'.<sup>31</sup> Thus precisely while recognising the 'problems and dangers' inherent in the enterprise, Brunner contends, 'it is not surprising that the Church [...] has continually felt obliged to set up such norms of faith and doctrine as should provide a "standard", and give the right direction to Christian belief'.<sup>32</sup> There is urgent need here in spite of tangible risks.

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<sup>29</sup> Brunner, *Dogmatics*, I:51, where he also stresses the urgency of this work of *confession*, 'since doctrinal aberrations affect not only details of secondary importance, but also the heart of Christian doctrine, the truth of revelation itself'.

<sup>30</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, IV:420.

<sup>31</sup> Jack L. Stotts, "Introduction: Confessing After Barmen", in Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen*, trans. John Hoffmeyer (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), xi.

<sup>32</sup> Brunner, *Dogmatics*, I:51.

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If, then, some sort of confession is necessary, what might lie behind the enterprise of writing a *new* confession at a given point in time, rather than just drawing on already existing texts? One might think of four different types of answer, all evidenced in history at different points.

First, a confession might arise from the desire to guard the church from an internal threat – from a teaching which purported to be Christian but which was deemed to be heretical. This may be the reason for writing a confession that springs to mind first: it lies behind the Nicene Creed of 325 against Arianism, and the Belhar Confession of 1982 against apartheid.

Second, a confession might arise from the event of the reunification of two formerly divided churches. In such a situation, there may be offered a fresh statement of shared faith that indicates the agreement reached and presents a sign of unity. One might think here of the text of the 1972 Basis of Union of the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom.

Third, a confession might arise in order to defend the church against an external threat – offering an account of that threat and a response from the church. In reading around such episodes, one often finds the language of a *status confessionis*. This is a situation of confession in which the church sees no alternative but to speak, in which, Stotts writes, ‘a clear sense emerges that the church can no longer be the church of Jesus Christ without taking a risky but firm stand on what must be affirmed, what denied in church and/or world’.<sup>33</sup> Again, this reason for writing a confession may spring readily to mind. In the twentieth century, it famously lies behind the Barmen Declaration of 1934, in the context of the threat to the church in Germany posed by the National Socialist regime.

Finally, a confession might arise to present to the church and to the world that which the church teaches and believes, without any immediate background drama. A new context might require a fresh restatement of the Gospel or an existing context might demand clear Christian teaching. One might recall here the Apostles’ Creed, or the 1563 Heidelberg Catechism.

These four possible motivations – heresy, reunion, danger, and instruction – are not, of course, mutually exclusive, and in many cases clearly coincide. And it is important to note that these four motivations each, in their own way, contribute to the work of the church in addressing two audiences: in respect of those *outwith* the church, they serve the church as an identity marker and an apologetic device;

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<sup>33</sup> Stotts, “Introduction”, xii. Similarly, Berkouwer refers to ‘specific situations when the Church was summoned *ad hoc* to make necessary decisions in order to elucidate a confused and dangerous time, full of concrete temptation at one definite point [...] such that t]he Church [...] felt herself forced to a confessional answer for this time, in new temptation’, *The Church*, 299. Berkouwer further observes that on such occasions, there is frequently ‘charismatic and intuitive insight into the dangers of a special situation, which then can acquire significance in the whole Church’ (ibid.).

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in respect of those *within* the church, they serve the church as a formative norm that offers material guidance and holistic direction.

Perhaps, then, on Reformed soil, it might indeed be recognised that there are times when particular *new* acts of confession – in distinction from, but not opposition to ongoing acts of *confessing* or existing texts of *confession* – are also both desirable and necessary. This may arise in situations where the essence of Christian faith and teaching is severely menaced or where the continuation of Christian witness is radically endangered and compromised. But it may also arise in situations where new reunions or present confusions recommend fresh statements of the truth of the Gospel. A new confession will seek to speak *to* the present, and *beyond* the present – recognising its inability to do either as infallibly as it might like.<sup>34</sup> And in all its time-bound and sin-bound character, it will seek to point away from itself and its context in a way that witnesses towards those truths larger than both itself and the church.

Yet one final question remains: how can the church recognise when a situation has been reached in which a new confession is necessary – when it has reached a *status confessionis*?



### **Conclusion**

This article has reflected first, upon the act of *confessing*, and second, upon the work of *confession*. It has suggested that the dynamic act of the former moves to the reified text of the latter by way of *necessity* – albeit a necessity of emergency, in a sinful world – in the history of the church. The final question to consider here is how to recognise when such a point of necessity has arisen in history, drawing inspiration from the text of Ecclesiastes that ‘For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven’. How does the church discern when under heaven the season for a new confession has arrived?

It was ventured above that, when the church engages in *any* act of confessing – including that of confession or new confession – it is confronted not only by the world and its needs, but also by the fact that its members know themselves to be citizens under heaven and thus to be encountered at every juncture by the presence and grace and demand of God. In light of this consolation and responsibility, three suggestions for discerning the season might be offered.

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<sup>34</sup> Barth writes that a confession expresses ‘insight given for the moment’, but acknowledges immediately that ‘such insight is always to be given again, to be given new, purer, deeper’, *Theology and Church*, 114. He therefore writes that ‘From the beginning, the Reformed Church has treated its creeds as open to discussion and improvement, as liable to be superseded’, and quotes the Bern Synod of 1532: ‘we [...] will not limit the course of the Holy Spirit, which does not go backward towards the flesh but always forward towards the image of Jesus Christ’ (ibid., 115).



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First, any move to confession must be taken in obedience to the will of God. The church must believe that God has laid upon it today the task of pursuing a new confession. Honourable intentions and pragmatic instincts, earthly motivations and changing contexts, are not valid reasons if the will of God goes unheeded. In the context of the conditionality of any creed of the church, John Webster writes of the ‘self-reforming character of the church’s thought and speech’, explaining: ‘Reformation is needed not so we can keep step with the world – why on earth would we want to do that? – but so we can make sure that we are properly out of step with the world and therefore trying to keep pace with God’.<sup>35</sup> The primary criterion for adjudicating the faithfulness of embarking upon a new confession is obedience before God.

Second, any move to confession must be undertaken in the confidence that the church has something particular and essential to say at the given time. Confession is no marginal matter; rather, as Berkouwer notes, in confession the church’s ‘whole life before God and before [human beings] is at stake’.<sup>36</sup> And so, correspondingly, Barth writes that anyone proposing a new confession ‘must believe [...] he has something true and important to say about the counsels of God and [...] something definite to offer in God’s name’.<sup>37</sup> There is no point embarking upon a new confession just for the sake of saying something, or anything.

Third, any move to confession must be undertaken in an ongoing openness to the direction of the Spirit and in an ongoing hope for the coming of the kingdom. To register this point is to say something about that demeanour that must accompany any movement towards a new confession. Such work should be undertaken in an attitude that is paradoxically both confident and humble, both insistent and demurring, both hopeful and realistic. And such work should above all be undertaken in an atmosphere of prayer – without the grace and presence of God for which prayer petitions, the quest to confess *in any sense* is lost.

If all this proves too daunting, and the desire takes hold instead to retain existing confessions, in the belief that the church may not – after all – be in a *status confessionis*, then it should be noted that this path is not an easy path either. Webster again captures the matter well: ‘citation of the past will not suffice for a

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<sup>35</sup> John Webster, “Confession and Confessions”, in *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism*, ed. Christopher R. Seitz (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2001), 129, quoted in Allen, *Reformed Theology*, 142.

<sup>36</sup> Berkouwer, *The Church*, 308.

<sup>37</sup> Barth, *Theology and Church*, 129. Berkouwer correspondingly observes that ‘A confession must not only be correct; it must also be important: definitive for the Church’s whole life, for her walking in the truth, her ‘being’ as the light of the world, a city on a hill, the salt of the earth’, *The Church*, 302f.

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church in which reformation is not an inherited condition but an event'.<sup>38</sup> It is not only that it is sometimes true, to borrow words from Alexander Schweizer from the nineteenth century, that 'Our fathers confessed their belief, and we struggle to believe their confession'.<sup>39</sup> It is also that the impulse to retain what the church recognises already and to avoid the work of new confession does not absolve it from the difficult work of seeking to make past confessions plausible and relevant today.<sup>40</sup>

This, then, is a moment in the church for discernment under heaven, a season to seek wisdom in and for the church as it moves forward and faces questions surrounding its confession. There is no easy or obvious way forward. But the church can be consoled by the fact that it does not make its way alone: the Lord is the shade at its right hand who watches over all its comings and goings, now and for ever more, and will not let its feet slip (Psalm 121).

*Paul T. Nimmo holds the King's Chair of Systematic Theology at the University of Aberdeen.*

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<sup>38</sup> John Webster, *Barth's Earlier Theology: Scripture, Confession and Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 11, quoted in Allen, *Reformed Theology*, 155.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Busch, *Reformiert*, 34.

<sup>40</sup> Barth writes simply, 'Repetition without commentary would be both laziness and cowardice', *Theology and Church*, 130.