



Dr. Jason Van Vliet is professor of Dogmatics at the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches in Hamilton, Ontario  
[jason.vanvliet@canrc.org](mailto:jason.vanvliet@canrc.org)

# New Confessions: Do we need them?

*Can a teenager who texts from a cell phone really relate to a catechism written with a quill?*

Recently, Dr. R.C. Janssen, minister of the Abbotsford Canadian Reformed Church, published the dissertation which he wrote for his doctoral degree. It's called *By This Our Subscription: Confessional Subscription in the Dutch Reformed Tradition Since 1816*.<sup>1</sup> Rev. C. Bouwman has already reviewed this book on the pages of this magazine (Vol 58, No 21). I will not repeat what he has said. Indeed, I can concur with two of Bouwman's conclusions. First, Dr. Janssen has made a very detailed and thorough study of confessional subscription and we ought to be thankful for that. Second, the author is not afraid to ask some important questions. One of them is this: how can our confessions, written centuries ago, still be relevant today? It is particularly this question that I wish to pursue further.

## The problem and the proposal

"The biggest problem then," Janssen writes, "is that confessional documents have become outdated" (361). By way of example, he mentions that the Catechism's treatment of the sacraments is too detailed, the Canons of Dort are too elaborate for the average church member, and there is not enough in the confessions about marriage, covenant, and women in office (379). Presumably, these deficiencies could be addressed by updating the language and content of various articles or Lord's Days that seem to be out-of-date. If the confessions were a house, then this would be like replacing the old light fixtures, or perhaps even the windows, with more modern ones. According to Janssen, this is possible but not preferable. He would rather disassemble the house – meticulously saving all the good timbers and tiles – and rebuild a completely new

one. In his own words, "I believe churches today would be best off rewriting their confessional heritage" (368).

In concrete terms, how would this look? He suggests that "the body of confessional substance be poured into various moulds": a defining, a declarative, and a doxological confession (361, 370). Three new confessions: to be sure, it's an ambitious proposal!

## The process

In order to write these new confessions, Janssen proposes a process that contains fifteen steps (372), but it comes down to the following. There would be a standing synodical committee called "Confessing." So, just like we now have a standing committee for the *Book of Praise*, we would have another standing committee for our new confessions. This synodical committee would work on the text of these new confessions. When a new article is ready, and general synod provisionally approves it, the draft would be sent to the classes (Classis Pacific West, Classis Niagara, etc). Each classis could write to the standing committee submitting their suggestions for improvements. The article may bounce back and forth between the standing committee, general synod, and classes a number of times. However, when seventy-five percent of the classes and general synod are satisfied with the article, it goes out for a trial period among the churches. Then, so long as no major objections are brought forward, the next general synod will adopt the new article. Presumably, a number of articles could go through this process at the same time, otherwise it would take a very long time before any new confession would be complete.



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Coeditors: R. Aasman, E. Kampen, K. Stam, C. Van Dam

**ADDRESS FOR COPY MANAGER:**

Clarion, 57 Oakridge Drive South, St. Albert, AB T8N 7H2  
E-Mail: veenendaal@shaw.ca

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Now, you may be wondering: why does the general synod send its proposal first to the classes, and then only later on to the local churches? Usually, when synodical committees have reports they end up on the table of our local consistories. However, Janssen prioritizes the role of classes because, as he writes, "I believe more prominence should be given to the role of the classis than is customary today" (420). In fact, he would even go so far as to say that "a broader assembly is able to discipline those guilty of confessional unfaithfulness and rescue the local church" (299). This is tied in with his preferred approach to church government which is called "connectionalism" (298-300). This is contrasted with "autonomism" in which the authority to discipline rests only with the local consistory, not the broader assemblies. We'll come back to connectionalism a little later.

**At first glance**

Initially common sense seems to confirm what Janssen is proposing, ambitious though it may be. Let's go back to that house for a moment. You can replace the old, yellow swag lamps, and the drafty, single-pane windows, and the worn, shag carpets, and the leaky, lead plumbing, and the. . . . However, there comes a time when you may say: "It's just not worth replacing and renovating anymore. Time to build new!" So, if it's true that there comes a time when an old house cannot be salvaged and it's time for a new one, then why wouldn't the same be true for confessions? After all, some of these confessions date back to the 1500s and the Nicene Creed even goes back to the 300s. A lot of chronological water has flowed under the ecclesiastical bridge since then! Can a teenager who texts from a cell phone really relate to a catechism written with a quill?

**On second thought**

Back when I was a theological student, some of us used to lead a Bible study at a rehab centre for alcoholics in downtown Hamilton. One young man

at those Bible studies was particularly keen. After a number of discussions with him, I showed him the Heidelberg Catechism. Scanning it with curiosity, he asked if he could borrow it. "Sure," I said. The next time we saw each other, he came right up to me. "How come you were holding out on me? Why didn't you give me this treasure chest earlier?!" he demanded. "Which treasure chest?" I asked. "This catechism!" he exclaimed. As it turned out, he had read the catechism, cover to cover, and found it so edifying that he was actually offended that I didn't lend him a copy any sooner. To be sure, he didn't understand every sentence in every Lord's Day. So we had more to discuss. Nevertheless, this man – who never grew up in a Christian home, dropped out of high school, lived on the streets of Hamilton and became addicted to alcohol – he connected with the Catechism in such a deep and personal way that he dubbed it: "the treasure chest." So, are the confessions really so outdated?

## Abiding confessions

Why did this young man from Hamilton connect so well with a catechism published in Heidelberg in 1563? Well, in the Catechism, he found a thorough, yet succinct, explanation of "all that is promised us in the gospel" (LD 7). In other words, precisely because the catechism guided him into the treasures of the gospel, it became a spiritual treasure chest for him. Moreover, since the gospel is the "living and enduring word of God" (1 Pet 1:23), it is not surprising that the confessions which summarize this gospel also have a certain enduring, or abiding, quality to them.

### Do we need new confessions?

At this point it is helpful to dig into a little bit of Latin. Scripture has been called *norma normans*. Back in ancient Rome, where they spoke Latin, a carpenter used a *norma* when he built a house. Today builders call it a "framing square." Before the 2x4 walls are nailed into place the builder uses his square to set the angle at precisely ninety degrees. Likewise, Scripture is that spiritual square which determines the straightness or crookedness of every teaching. So, loosely translated, *norma normans* means the square that sets things straight.

Taking this a step farther, once a builder sets all the walls in a room straight with his square (*norma*), those walls became *norma normata*. That is to say, the room itself is now square because it's been squared by the

framer's square. So, if you had two other loose boards which were nailed together, but you felt that they were not at right angles, you could set them in the corner of that room and test them by the squared room. Our confessions are like that square room, *norma normata*, and thus they can be used to teach and test sound doctrine.

These terms, *norma normans* and *norma normata*, have a long history in Reformed circles, and Dr. Janssen is well aware of this. However, he suggests a change. He writes, "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" (362). So, Scripture is still the ultimate norm but, in his own words, "between Scripture and confession stands the faith of the confessor" (362). This confessor is both Christians individually and the church communally.

However, there is a problem with this arrangement. Our faith does not stand so firm and forever as the Word of the Lord does (Isa 40:8). Our faith can be "little" (Matt 6:30) or "lacking" (1 Thess 3:10); it needs to "grow" (2 Thess 1:3) and "progress" (Phil 1:25). The gift of faith is wonderful, but it is still too imperfect to qualify as *norma normans*, a square that sets things straight. For this reason we should keep a direct connection from Scripture to the confessions. The faith of the church does not stand as an intermediate norm between them. Rather the church has built straight and square confessions (*norma normata*) using the square of holy Scriptures (*norma normans*). Of course, since the authors of our confessions are fallible, it is possible that as they were writing a confession, they did not set something precisely straight. Therefore, if we measure our confessions with Scripture and find something that is off square by a degree or two, then it is incumbent on us to work towards correcting that confession. However, our Profession of Faith Form says it correctly. It is not the faith of the confessor, but it is "the doctrine of the Word of God" which is "summarized in the confessions."

## The proper procedure

If the confessions would need to be re-squared, how would that be done? In short, a local church would have to follow due process and have the matter put on the agenda of a general synod. That general synod would likely appoint a committee to study the matter. Then, as you often read in the acts of general synods, this committee would be charged "to report to the churches

# Church News

Accepted the call to Spring Creek Canadian Reformed Church of Tintern, Ontario:

**Rev. P.H. Holtvlüwer**

of Carman East, Manitoba

Called by the St. Albert Canadian Reformed Church of St. Albert, Alberta:

**Candidate Tony Roukema**

Called by the Vernon Canadian Reformed Church, British Columbia:

**Candidate Arend Witten**

Called by the Eben-Ezer Canadian Reformed Church of Chatham, Ontario:

**Candidate Arend Witten**

**Worship location change**

Starting August 1, 2010, and for the duration of construction of the new auditorium, Grand Valley worship services will be held in the gym of Dufferin Area Christian School, 394016 Dufferin County Road 12, Laurel, Ontario.

six months prior to the next general synod." I emphasize "to the churches" because there is a principle here that we ought to hold dear. Shifting more authoritative weight to classis, as Janssen suggests, even to the point of giving broader assemblies the jurisdiction to discipline office bearers in doctrinal matters, is not in accord with our Church Order (Arts. 66 and 71).

In addition, our own history teaches us that this sort of connectionalism does more damage than good. Janssen suggests that if a broader assembly were invested with the power to discipline, it could "rescue a local church" (299). However, it can also tear apart a local church, as was the case on September 25, 1944, when Classis Groningen in The Netherlands suspended three ministers and fifty-one elders. This classical decision resulted in a rupture, not a rescue, of the local church in the city of Groningen.<sup>2</sup> Without slipping into a spirit of independentism, local autonomy is something we need to promote not demote.

## The role of the preacher

In conclusion, let's return to the opening question: do we need new confessions? Our own history teaches us that new confessions can be written. Ever since the 1560s, the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism have served the Reformed churches well. However, some decades later, in 1618-19, the churches reached a consensus that there was a definite need to deal in greater detail with doctrines such as election and regeneration. So, they built an addition to our confessional house: the Canons of Dort. As they built, they used the same trustworthy *norma normans*, holy Scripture, to make sure that new room was also straight and square.

Consequently, it is conceivable that, at some point in the future, the churches would reach another consensus that on a certain point of doctrine it is necessary to add yet another room to our confessional house. It is questionable, though, whether much would be gained by dismantling our present confessions and pouring their substance into new moulds. The pertinent question is: would the re-pouring ever stop? To write three new confessions, following Janssen's proposed procedure, would be a long-term project. Realistically, it would take a decade, if not decades. Yet, by the time the new confessions were finally finalized, new issues would undoubtedly come to the fore, at which time the re-pouring would have to begin all over again. It's hard to live inside a house that is constantly being re-poured and rebuilt. Households, also households of faith,

flourish in an atmosphere of consistent stability, not constant mutability.

Therefore, what we really need, more than confessional re-pours, are dedicated preachers and teachers who apply the truths of Scripture, as we profess them in our confessions, to the hearts and lives of God's household. And let them do this in a most vibrant and relevant way! True, the confessions refer to "the damnable error of the Epicureans" (BC 13) and the resurgence of Pelagian teachings among the Remonstrants (C of D RE 1.4). The teenager who texts from his cell phone, as well as his grandfather who drives a big, old Buick, may not instantly understand the relevance of those sentences. But both of them can learn. And their pastor is able and obliged to teach them, from the pulpit and in the catechism room.

Conscientious, relevant preachers will be a greater blessing to the household of faith than constantly re-pouring the confessions.

<sup>1</sup> Available online at [http://dspace.library.uu.nl:8080/bitstream/1874/34069/1/Dissertatie\\_R.C.Janssen.pdf](http://dspace.library.uu.nl:8080/bitstream/1874/34069/1/Dissertatie_R.C.Janssen.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> These events are detailed by Rev. D. van Dijk in Chapter 10 of his book, *My Path to Liberation*. Trans. Th. Plantinga. (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 2004). See especially pp 322-326.