



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

A number of members and assemblies in the CRC have asked, in response to recent synodical decisions about gravamen, about the space allowed for officebearers who are wrestling with particular doctrines. In some minds, the “full agreement” required by synodical regulations has set an impossibly high bar for church leaders who desire to uphold their calling to lead with integrity, humility, and submission to the Word of God and to our Reformed confessions. Synods 2024 and 2025 addressed the level of affirmation required of officebearers with regard to CRCNA doctrinal standards. In both cases, synod noted that honoring the church’s confessional standards is not at odds with grace and patience.

The answer to the question about what it means to “affirm the doctrines in the confessions without reservation” 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 is need for further clarification) to discern how to balance the various aspects of confessional adherence in the local church.

It is clear, from the preamble and primary recommendation given by the advisory committee at Synod 2024, that synod’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.

Synod has also attempted to make clear that a gravamen “is not merely a note of discomfort or curiosity” but rather a growing sense that “a teaching in the confessional documents is not the teaching of God’s Word” (*Covenant for Officebearers*; see *Acts of Synod 2025*, p. 670). The word “gravamen” indicates a weighty, serious matter: in the words of synod, “a persistent serious doubt or a settled conviction” (Supplement, Church Order Art. 5-a, A, 2). Local discernment has been and continues to be central to the process of discerning whether an officebearer simply has a question or wondering about a confessional teaching, or holds 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 also has the authority to judge *whether* a given difficulty rises to the weight of requiring a gravamen.¹ 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; see also *Acts of Synod 2025*, p. 671).

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 the attribution of the authorship of Hebrews to Paul (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).

Wrestling with questions of faith is a necessary and normal part of the Christian life (think of the psalms). Reading Church Order Art. 5 and its Supplements in light of the preambles and decisions of Synod 2024 and 2025 reaffirm 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.

¹ 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.”