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Confessing Faith: Freedom of Conscience, Actualized Confession of Faith, and Confessional Allegiance

XIMIAN XU
University of Edinburgh, UK
simeon.xu@ed.ac.uk

This paper draws on the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck's (1854–1921) views of conscience and confession of faith to articulate a dynamic view of confessing faith with a free conscience. It will argue that a genuine ecclesial confession must be coupled with the believer's free conscience in the actualized confession of faith in Christ in obedience to the word of God. This dynamic view of actualized confession—that is, confessing faith in one's life as a whole—indicates that faith incorporates not only the life in the ecclesial community but also life in the world. As such, although different churches uphold different written forms of confession of faith, actualized confession of faith assimilates the differentiation of confessional texts—being made there and then—into the consensus of confessing faith in Christ being reached here and now. The emphasis of actualized confession of faith on "here and now" will benefit the contemporary ecumenical movement.

Keywords: confession of faith, Herman Bavinck, conscience, freedom, ecumenical movement

In exploring a postmodern ecclesiology, Stanley Grenz points out that central to "a postmodern Christian ecclesiology is the concept of the church as community."[1] With emphasis on relationships, the church as community displays mutual solidarity within.[2] Throughout Grenz's article, he does not mention the ecclesial confession of faith. By the phrase "confession of faith," I refer to the profession or confession of what a Christian

[1] Stanley J. Grenz, "Ecclesiology," in *Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 252.
[2] Grenz, "Ecclesiology," 258.

Ximian Xu (PhD, University of Edinburgh) is the Kenneth and Isabel Morrison postdoctoral research fellow in theology and ethics of artificial intelligence at the School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh. He is the author of Theology as the Science of God: Herman Bavinck's Wetenschappelijke Theology for the Modern World*, published with Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht in 2022.*
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believes and how her life is governed by her faith. Following this, I use the phrase "ecclesial confession of faith" to indicate the profession of what a particular ecclesial community believes and how the life of its members is governed by their faith. Hence, ecclesial confession serves to distinguish various ecclesial communities. In this sense, Grenz articulates an ecclesiology that goes beyond denominational identities. That is, an ecclesial community is essentially determined by relationships; without subscribing to the confession of an ecclesial community, a believer can still become a member of the community provided that a sound relationship can be established between her and other community members.

The relationship-defined trait of the church coincides with the ethos and culture of postmodernism. The postmodern paradigm of relativism, which is characterized as communal rather than individualistic, seems to undercut the possibility of confessional allegiance.[3] None of the ecclesial confessions can claim one's absolute subscription. Moreover, consumerism that is prevailing in the contemporary society downplays the application of ecclesial confessions.[4] This is so because contemporary consumerism becomes spiritual and religious in its own right.[5] In this way, consumerism seems to overpower the religious implication of ecclesial confessions in such a way that a believer's confessional allegiance gives way to her subjective decision, which is characteristic of consumerism. In other words, a believer's allegiance depends upon her own preference and consequently is susceptible to change. That being so, it can be argued that as long as such a relativistic or consumerist spirit creeps into a believer's faith, she may repudiate any tinge of confessionality. Given this, the church needs to reconsider how to confess the Christian faith publicly and officially nowadays. To this end, one has to address the following questions: Does the church necessarily endorse a confession? Is it mandatory for the church member to subscribe to the ecclesial confession? To what extent does the church member have a free conscience in her confessional allegiance?

In dealing with these questions, the church could lean toward two extremes. On the one side, the church member is required to subscribe

[3] See Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 15.

[4] "At its religious root, the culture of consumerism involves the false worship of another god, the god of consumption; in short, of materialism." Gregory R. Beabout and Eduardo J. Echeverria, "The Culture of Consumerism: A Catholic and Personalist Critique," *Journal of Markets and Morality* 5, no. 2 (2002): 340.

[5] "Consumerism is a type of spirituality,… a way of pursuing meaning and identity, a way of connecting with other people." William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 36.

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rigorously to the ecclesial confession. Any reservation taken on one or several articles of the ecclesial confession cannot be tolerated. On the other side, freedom of conscience is cherished to such an extent that the ecclesial confession becomes nominal or even relinquished. In order to get around the two extreme situations, this article aims to retrieve and appropriate the neo-Calvinist theologian Herman Bavinck's (1854–1921) theology of confession to reformulate the confessional nature of the church in the contemporary age.

With a Reformed upbringing, Bavinck's theology was nurtured in the context of Reformed faith. As one of the leading figures of neo-Calvinism, which was a nationwide movement in the nineteenth-century Netherlands and intended for the revival of Calvinism to have a bearing on all national life, Bavinck stands firmly in his own Reformed tradition while constructing dogmatics for the modern age. The dogmatician Bavinck contends, "Dogmatics is nothing other than the scientific description of the *confession* of the church."[6] In addition, with an eye on the essence of the dogmatician's work, he asserts that "all dogmaticians, when they go to work, stand consciously or unconsciously in the tradition of the Christian faith in which they were born and nurtured and come to Scripture as Reformed, or Lutheran, or Roman Catholic Christians."[7] Accordingly, Bavinck conceives of the ecclesial confession as indispensable to the dogmatician's work. Viewed in this light, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that Bavinck's entire theological project is characterized as being confessional or, more specifically, confessional in the Calvinist way.

This article will argue that, according to Bavinck, the church must be confessional or better confessing, which neither implies coercive action of the church nor belittles the validity of freedom of conscience. A genuine ecclesial confession must be coupled with the believer's free conscience in confessing faith. The shift in emphasis from confession to *confessing* carries the connotation of the actualized confession of faith in Christ in one's obedience to the word of God. Actualized confession is dynamic and shows that the believer's life as a whole, incorporating both the life in the ecclesial community and the life in the world, should involve confessing faith. This confessing faith, which unites individual believers with faith communities without violating freedom of conscience, lends support to the ecumenical movement by constructing the differentiated consensus. That is, although different churches uphold different written forms of confession of faith, actualized confession

[6] Herman Bavinck, "The Pros and Cons of a Dogmatic System," trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman, *The Bavinck Review* 5 (2014): 94.

[7] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003–2008), 1.82 (hereafter *RD*).

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of faith assimilates the differentiation of confessional texts being made there and then into the consensus of confessing faith in Christ being reached here and now.

In what follows, I will first explicate Bavinck's claim that there is no church without confession, following which I will analyze his discourse on the function of conscience with reference to faith. Then I will explore how Bavinck tackles the *prima facie* paradox of confessional allegiance and freedom of conscience. This article concludes with the reflection on actualized confession of faith in view of the ecumenical movement.

No Church without Confession

With the increasing interest in Bavinck's theology in the past two decades, numerous aspects of Bavinck's theological system have been explored.[8] It seems, however, that Bavinck's emphasis on the confessional nature of the church remains underexplored. Nonetheless, Nathaniel Gray Sutanto breaks the impasse by exploring the affinity between Bavinck's organic motif and the diversity of ecclesial confessions and, by doing so, construes Bavinck's ecclesiology as confessional and Catholic.[9] Sutanto's argumentation is developed based on the postulate that, for Bavinck, the church must be intrinsically confessional. In distinction to Sutanto, I will explore how Bavinck defines the church *in se* as confessional.

Bavinck sets out his definition of the ecclesial confession in the first pages of *Reformed Dogmatics*. In unpacking the concept of dogma, he points out its

[8] The following are several recent monographs and doctoral theses on Bavinck's theology: James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012); James Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020); Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, *God and Knowledge: Herman Bavinck's Theological Epistemology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2020); Cory Brock, *Orthodox Yet Modern: Herman Bavinck's Use of Friedrich Schleiermacher* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020); Bruce R. Pass, *The Heart of Dogmatics: Christology and Christocentrism in Herman Bavinck* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020); Jessica Joustra, "Following the Way of Jesus: Herman Bavinck and John Howard Yoder in Dialogue on the Imitation of Christ" (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2018); Cameron D. Clausing, "'A Christian Dogmatic Does Not Yet Exist': The Influence of the Nineteenth Century Historical Turn on the Theological Methodology of Herman Bavinck" (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2020); Ximian Xu, *Theology as the Science of God: Herman Bavinck's Wetenschappelijke Theology for the Modern World* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022).

[9] See Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, "Confessional, International, and Cosmopolitan: Herman Bavinck's Neo-Calvinistic and Protestant Vision of the Catholicity of the Church," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 12 (2018): 22–39.

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social character—that is, a dogma is connected with a specific community. This observation leads to the assertion that "the church's confession can be called the dogma *quoad nos* (for us), that is, the truth of God as it has been incorporated in the consciousness of the church and confessed by it in its own language."[10] Although Bavinck sets forth this definition at the beginning of his *magnum opus*, he unfolds his main idea of ecclesial confession primarily in his discourse on dogmatic methodology and faith as the *principium internum* in *Reformed Dogmatics*, volume 1. This text structure gives rise to two questions: What does it mean that God's truth is incorporated in the consciousness of the church? To what extent is the ecclesial confession important for dogmatics and its methodology?

These questions are *de facto* pertinent to the relationship between Holy Scripture and the ecclesial confession. In a paper authored in his early career, Bavinck argued that "both of these—Scripture and confession—are objective and exist independently of the dogmatician."[11] After many years, he construed this sentiment further to counter the methodology of theological modernism, which deviates from the objective religious truth and turns to "the believing subject, [and] the Christian consciousness."[12] Although both Scripture and the ecclesial confession are objective to theology, they are not identical and cannot be credited with the same authority. This is in line with Bavinck's contention in another early article (1891), where he argues that the *principium* of theology is Holy Scripture rather than the ecclesial confessions.[13] He also claims elsewhere that, as being part of the tradition of the church, the ecclesial confession "may be the rule of faith (*regula fidei*); it is not [theology's] foundation (*fundamentum fidei*). That distinction belongs to Scripture alone."[14]

[10] Bavinck, *RD*, 1.30. Another three conceptual features of dogma are: (1) concerning truth for living, (2) the combination of divine authority and ecclesial confession; (3) referring broadly to the whole articles of Christian faith (29–34).

[11] Bavinck, "The Pros and Cons of a Dogmatic System," 97; Herman Bavinck, "Het voor en tegen van een dogmatisch systeem," *De Vrije Kerk* 7 (1881): 458.

[12] Bavinck, *RD*, 66. The figures that Bavinck has in mind here are Kant, Schleiermacher, and Hegel.

[13] See Herman Bavinck, "Confessie en Dogmatiek," *Theologische Studiën* 3 (1891): 267. Therein, Bavinck refuses to call Holy Scripture "source" (*bron*), which seems to characterize the connection between Scripture and theology as being mechanical. Yet, the term "principium" shows that this connection is organic.

[14] Bavinck, *RD*, 1.452–53. Holy Scripture's distinctively methodological status is woven into the three *principia* of dogmatics: God as the *principium essendi*, God's self-revelation being recorded in Holy Scripture as the *principium cognoscendi externum*, and the Holy Spirit's internal illumination as the *principium cognoscendi internum* (Bavinck, *RD*, 1.213).

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Having claimed for the distinctive status of Holy Scripture in the practice of dogmatics, Bavinck designates the ecclesial confession the guideline (*leidraad*) of dogmatics.[15] This being so, the dogmatician "lives in the fellowship of faith with one Christian church or another."[16] Following this, the methodological significance of ecclesial confession for dogmatics lies in the fact that the ecclesial confession is the *norma normans*. This upshot is related to the first question raised above on the implication of the incorporation of God's truth into the consciousness of the church:

> This significance of the church for theology and dogmatics is grounded in the link that Christ himself forged between the two. *He promised his church the Holy Spirit, who would guide it into all truth.* This promise sheds a glorious light upon the history of dogma. It is the explication of Scripture, the exposition that the Holy Spirit has given, in the church, of the treasures of the Word. Accordingly, the task of the dogmatician is not to draw the material for his dogmatics exclusively from the written *confession* of his own church but to view it in the total context of the unique faith and life of his church, and then again in the context of the history of the whole church of Christ.[17]

According to this passage, the work of the Holy Spirit operates in the church after the dispensation of the Son in order that the church can theologically reflect on all truth. Seen from this perspective, the church cannot dispense with theology, which shows the movement of *incorporating* God's truth into the consciousness of the church. Bavinck is of the opinion that, while the Son builds the connection between the church and theology, the cooperation of Christ and the Spirit plays a pivotal role in the founding of the church in the dispensation of the Spirit: "The kingship of Christ over his church consists in that by this word and Spirit he gathers and governs his own and protects and keeps them in the redemption acquired. The church has its foundation and unity in the counsel of God, in the covenant of grace, in the person of Christ, but consisting as it does of human beings, it must be gathered and added to by Christ's word and Spirit."[18]

In addition to gathering God's people to constitute the church, the Spirit continues to guide the church and augments the treasures of the Word in the church throughout history. In this regard, Todd Billings' view of discerning the Spirit in the interpretation of Holy Scripture corresponds with Bavinck's pneumatological account of the accumulating truths in the church. Billings

[15] See Bavinck, "Confessie en Dogmatiek," 264.
[16] Bavinck, *RD*, 1.85.
[17] Bavinck, *RD*, 1.85–86; emphasis added.
[18] Bavinck, *RD*, 4.372.

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maintains that the Holy Spirit's indigenization of Holy Scripture in various cultures and nations is presupposed for biblical hermeneutics.[19] That being so, spiritual discernment in biblical interpretation consists in the awareness of the Spirit who "[leads] culturally diverse believers into the expansive yet bounded truth that is in Christ."[20] To paraphrase Bavinck's viewpoint in Billings' language, the Holy Spirit leads the church to go through diverse cultural contexts over the centuries to expand the understanding of the word of God and augment the treasures of the Word.

To be sure, these treasures of the Word, which impregnate the tradition of the church, include the ecclesial confession. That is to say, although the Spirit gave birth to the church at the Pentecost, He has sown the seed of the ecclesial confession. Rather than producing *the* ecclesial confession, this seed sprouted in history, bearing diverse ecclesial confessions and thus proving that Christianity is a catholic religion. "Christianity is a world religion suited and intended for every people and age, for every class and rank, for every time and place. That church is most catholic that most clearly expresses in its confession and applies in its practice this international and cosmopolitan character of the Christian religion."[21] In short, for Bavinck, there is no church without confession insofar as variegated confessions display different churches' testimony to the treasures of the Word in their own contexts.

Historically, Bavinck's idea of the marriage of the church and confession was manifest in his endeavor to establish the union between his own denomination, the Christian Reformed Church (*Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk*), and the *Doleantie*, led by Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), another leading figure of neo-Calvinism.[22] This is because the separation of the Christian Reformed Church from the established Dutch Reformed Church (*Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*) in 1834 was caused by the first seceders' (*Afgescheidenen*) dissatisfaction with the established church's deviation from Reformed confessions, particularly the Three Forms of Unity—the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort, and the Heidelberg Catechism.[23] In like manner, the

[19] See J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 122–23.

[20] Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God*, 147.

[21] Bavinck, *RD*, 4.323. Elsewhere, Bavinck maintains the intrinsic relationship between the catholicity of Christianity and diverse ecclesial confessions; see Herman Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 27, no. 2 (1992): 250.

[22] On Bavinck's enthusiasm about the union of the two churches, see Eglinton, *Bavinck*, 159–61.

[23] See Herman Bavinck, "De Wetenschappelijke Roeping Onzer Kerk," *De Vrije Kerk* 8, no. 2–3 (1882): 89–90.

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Doleantie left the Dutch Reformed Church in 1886 because the *Hervormde* church decided to liberalize the believers' and ministers' subscription to Reformed confessions. Kuyper and his *Doleantie* fellows endorsed the Three Forms of Unity and thus were designated *Gereformeerde* (Reformed).[24] In 1892, the *Doleantie* and the Christian Reformed Church were united to establish the *Gereformeerde* churches in the Netherlands. The Dutch *Gereformeerde* connotes that the union between the two groups was grounded on the same Reformed tradition, namely the *Gereformeerde* Three Forms of Unity.[25] As such, the same *Gereformeerde* confessions drove the two ecclesial communities to merge into one *Gereformeerde* church.

Added to Bavinck's sentiment—the church and its confession are tied together from the church's inception—is his contention that the ecclesial confession is derived from the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti*. While demonstrating the *principium internum* of dogmatics, Bavinck lays emphasis on the work of the Spirit by arguing that the Spirit is the *principium cognoscendi internum*.[26] It is worth noting that, for Bavinck, this *principium cognoscendi internum* is in tandem with the testimony of the Spirit, which is the proof for the Spirit's identity as the *principium cognoscendi internum*. In this light, the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti* grounds the relationship between the Spirit and the dogmatic description of the ecclesial confession. Moreover, Bavinck insists that the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti* is unique to the Christian faith insofar as the Spirit's testimony gives birth to faith. He contends that

> The testimony of the Holy Spirit is of a religious-ethical kind and intimately bound up with people's own faith life. It does not bypass people's faith; it is not a voice from heaven, a dream or a vision. It is a witness that the Holy Spirit communicates *in, with,* and *through* our own spirit in faith. It is not given to unbelievers but is the portion only of the children of God.... But from the very beginning faith itself is the work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:3) and receives its seal and confirmation in the Spirit of adoption. *Believing itself is a witness of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and through our spirit.*[27]

This means that the Spirit operates in two ways in the believer. In terms of human subjectivity, the Spirit creates faith in the human being. Hence,

[24] See Jan de Bruijne, *Abraham Kuyper: A Pictorial Biography*, trans. Dagmare Houniet (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 149–50.

[25] Bavinck argues that "the two Churches united on the basis of doctrine and of the system of Church discipline"; Herman Bavinck, "The Reformed Churches in the Netherlands," *The Princeton Theological Review* 8, no. 3 (1910): 456.

[26] See Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek, Eerste Deel*, 4th ed. (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1928), 471.

[27] Bavinck, *RD*, 1.593–94; emphasis added.

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faith is the *principium internum cognoscendi* of theology.[28] On the other side, the Spirit objectively bears testimony to Christ. By doing so, the Spirit's work builds a bridge between the subjective and the objective.

The confession of faith is nothing less than the human person's subjective response to the objective truth under the Spirit's guidance. This means that a genuine internal faith cannot remain silent on external confession. Therefore, Bavinck is convinced that

> Confession is the obligation of all believers and is also the dictate of their own hearts; the person who truly believes with his whole heart and soul cannot but confess, that is, testify to the truth that has made him free, and to the hope that has been planted in his heart by that truth. Thus every believer and every church—if the testimony of the Holy Spirit be present there—confesses that the Word of God is the truth.[29]

At first glance, it seems that the confession of faith is individual rather than communal. If this were the case, the church could not claim for confessional allegiance of the individual believer.

Contrary to an individualistic approach to the confession of faith, Bavinck's view of the individual subjective response to objective truth should be construed in accordance with Bavinck's conception of the Spirit's testimony in three dimensions. First, the Spirit makes a witness to the divine characteristics and origin of Holy Scripture. Second, in the history of the church, the Spirit's testimony "is indirectly embodied in all the blessings that accrued to the church as church from Scripture (in the existence and continuing existence of the church as church) and directly in the united confession of the believing community throughout the centuries that Scripture is the word of God."[30] Third, the Spirit makes the testimony to the divine authority of Holy Scripture in the heart of the believer. Bavinck's primary concern in the

[28] Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek, Eerste Deel*, 534. The English *Reformed Dogmatics* renders the Latin term "principium" as principle, which contradicts its adoption of the English equivalent "foundation" elsewhere; Bavinck, *RD*, 1.565.

[29] Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1956), 102–03. Elsewhere, Bavinck writes: "The heart needs the mouth, for what fruit does it produce to believe with the heart without publicly confessing before men? The faith of the heart may justify, nevertheless, and confession lifts up this perfect salvation. Faith first shines when it declares itself in confession, and through this many are benefited. On the other hand, the mouth needs the heart, for there are many who confess Christ but whose hearts are far from him [Matt 15:8]." Herman Bavinck, *The Sacrifice of Praise: Meditations before and after Admission to the Lord's Supper*, ed. and trans. Cameron Clausing and Gregory Parker (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2019), 31.

[30] Bavinck, *RD*, 1.597.

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previous block quote is about the testimony of the Spirit and the divine authority of Holy Scripture, which echoes the enduring insistence on the Spirit's testimony to the authority of Scripture in the Reformed tradition. John Calvin argues, for example, that the testimony of the Spirit is stronger than any proof for the divine authority of Scripture.[31] In addition, Bavinck's triple testimony of the Spirit is in accord with Protestant orthodoxy. Despite this, they differ in a significant respect. Although Protestant orthodoxy defines the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti* as primary and the testimony in the church as subordinate, Bavinck designates the Spirit's testimony in Scripture as the primary motivation toward faith, the testimony in the church as the introductory motivation, and the testimony in the heart of the believer as the efficient cause of faith.[32]

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that Bavinck does not construe the three different testimonies of the Spirit in a hierarchical way. He is of the opinion that the Spirit's testimonies in these three dimensions are not discrete but rather singular and interpenetrated. "This threefold testimony is one and from the same Spirit. From Scripture, through the church, it penetrates the heart of the individual believer."[33] Furthermore, the singular testimony of the Spirit concatenates Holy Scripture, the church, and the individual believer. As such, individual confession of faith must be tied up with that of the church and vice versa; individual confession and ecclesial confession go hand in hand because both of them are reflective of the authenticity of the Spirit's testimony. From this vantage point, it comes to be seen that the believer should subscribe to the ecclesial confession and, by doing so, her subscription *per se* is confessing the Spirit's testimony in the Scripture. Meanwhile, Bavinck's claim that the church must have its confession is firmly grounded in the Spirit's threefold testimony.

My analysis of Bavinck's view of ecclesial confession has hitherto demonstrated that, for Bavinck, there is no church without confession. From the birth of the church onward, confession is coupled with the ecclesial community. Furthermore, the Spirit's testimony, incorporating the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti* and the testimony in the church, underwrites the affinity between the individual and ecclesial confession. Both observations prove Bavinck's view of the church's responsibility to claim for its members'

[31] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 1.7.4.

[32] Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics, Volume Two: Holy Scripture, The Cognitive Foundation of Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2003), 267; Bavinck, *RD*, 1.597.

[33] Bavinck, *RD*, 1.597.

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confessional allegiance. According to him, moreover, the believer's confessional allegiance must be practiced with a free conscience. In what follows, I will examine Bavinck's view of conscience with a view to faith.

Faith and Conscience

Bavinck gives critical weight to the idea of conscience in his theological system. In his mind, conscience is not merely about morality. Rather, it primarily and essentially concerns religion. In Bavinck's system, the notion of conscience always stresses the precedence of religion over morality.[34] As will be seen below, this religious nature of conscience underpins his articulation of the believer's confession of faith with an eye to her conscience. That is, given that conscience is tied up with faith, the believer's subscription to the ecclesial confession of faith should be understood in relation to her conscience.

Bavinck's view of conscience is rooted in his conceptual analysis of the Greek συνείδησις in the New Testament. He sums up the threefold meaning of conscience. First, συνείδησις generally refers to consciousness (*bewustzijn*) and knowledge.[35] Second, it carries the connotation of "a testimony present to my consciousness concerning my own circumstances and relationships, a self-judgment (*zelfbeoordeling*)."[36] Third, the Greek term connotes moral obligation that is exercised in accordance with God's law and will.[37] Taking the three meanings together, Bavinck describes conscience as follows:

> Consequently, the conscience provides the judgment of human beings about themselves in their existing relationship to God, his law, and his

[34] See Herman Bavinck, "Conscience," trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman, *The Bavinck Review* 6 (2015): 113–26; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics, Volume 1: Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, ed. John Bolt et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), particularly chapter 5 (hereafter *RE1*). I have demonstrated elsewhere the point that for Bavinck conscience brings to the spotlight: first, the relationship between God and humans and, second, human moral nature. This twofold dimension of conscience is clearly seen in Christ's silent conscience, which exhibits Christ's perfect relationship with God the Father; see Ximian Xu, "Did Christ Have a Conscience? Revisiting the Debates on Christ's (Un) Fallen Humanity," *Theological Studies* 82, no. 4 (2021): 583–602.

[35] See Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Ethiek, Eerste Deel*, ed. Dirk van Keulen (Utrecht: KokBoekencentrum, 2019), 132. The English translation renders the Dutch *bewustzijn* as "awareness"; Bavinck, *RE1*, 173. The same translation occurs at Bavinck, "Conscience," 117. Cory Brock demonstrates that the best English equivalent for *bewustzijn* should be consciousness; see Brock, *Orthodox Yet Modern*, 70.

[36] Bavinck, *RE1*, 174; rev. trans.; Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Ethiek, Eerste Deel*, 132.

[37] Bavinck, *RE1*, 174.

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> will. That law and will of God—in other words, God himself—in relation to which people consider themselves bound in their conscience and in terms of which they evaluate themselves in their conscience, is unchanging and remains eternally the same.[38]

According to this passage, faith in God is essential to Bavinck's view of conscience. In its fullest sense, conscience is not concerning human autonomy and freedom. Rather, it rests in the human obedience to God who is testified in one's consciousness. It is clear that Bavinck's view of conscience emphasizes God, the Creator of conscience. He argues accordingly, "Conscience is for us an oracle of God and therefore absolute."[39] It is this divine oracular character that forces him to identify conscience as a prominent one among other human capacities: "The conscience does not stand alongside our thought, feeling, or will, and even less is it included within one of these three. It stands above those capacities, has authority over them, and supplies each with its standard."[40]

It is worth noting that Bavinck here is not merely preoccupied with God as the Creator and governor of conscience. Otherwise, he would have entirely adopted a moral argument for God's existence, which violates his principle that theology must have God's revelation as the point of departure.[41] Bavinck illustrates the interconnection of faith and conscience from the perspective of God's salvific work. According to him, the first benefit that Christ acquired and distributed to God's people via his salvation is characterized as being relational. Specifically, this benefit refers to the restoration of the human "right relation to God and all creatures," which includes "the purification of our conscience."[42] The connection between faith and conscience, being built in salvation, is in accord with the aforementioned Bavinck's conception of conscience, which defines the function of conscience in terms of humanity's relationship with God.[43]

Following this, Bavinck explicates how this benefit is given to humans: "The first group of benefits is given us by the illumination of the Holy Spirit, is accepted on our part by *faith*, changes our consciousness, and *makes our conscience free*."[44] According to this, it can be argued, first, that faith and conscience are inseparable owing to God's salvation. If faith in Christ influences

[38] Bavinck, *RE1*, 174.
[39] Bavinck, *RE1*, 189.
[40] Bavinck, "Conscience," 124.
[41] See Bavinck, *RD*, 2.91.
[42] Bavinck, *RD*, 3.594. Two other benefits of Christ are the human renewal after the image of God and receiving heavenly inheritance and eternal blessedness.
[43] See Bavinck, *RE1*, 174.
[44] Bavinck, *RD*, 3.594; emphasis added. Bavinck writes elsewhere similarly "that conscience is good and pure that is washed in the blood of Christ, that is sanctified through faith,

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the whole human existence, Christ's benefits received by faith must penetrate the human person, including the human conscience. "The conscience, therefore, must be purified, and that has happened and is happening for believing Christians through the blood of Christ (Heb 9:14). At that point, they receive a 'purified conscience' (1 Tim 3:9; 2 Tim 1:3), a 'good conscience' (Acts 23:1; 1 Tim 1:5, 19; 1 Pet 3:16, 21), a 'clear conscience' (Acts 24:16)."[45]

Second, the transformed conscience is the consequence of the bestowal of Christ's benefits in faith. As such, the sanctified conscience must be brought into correspondence with faith; the object of faith determines the object to which the conscience responds. That is, "a conscience … bears witness in relation to God."[46] It is, however, noteworthy that, for Bavinck, the Christian conscience is not completely sanctified. He concedes that the transformed conscience is often caught in "an undeveloped, weakened condition." Nonetheless, through faith, the sanctified conscience continues to "[point] us to the forgiveness of sins in Christ."[47] In this sense, the correspondence between conscience and faith is concomitant with the struggle in the course of the pilgrimage toward God in Christ. Rather than downplaying the significance of Christ's benefits for humans, this struggle underlines what humans receive from God in Christ.

Third, without carrying the connotation of autonomy, freedom of conscience indicates its dependence on faith, which means that the function of conscience is tied to faith. Bavinck illustrates this point in his discourse on the correspondence between conscience and revelation:

> The supreme norm for our life is the divine law that may echo in our conscience as a voice that is dull and unclear and as though from a distance. Something can be a sin before God that nonetheless is not against our conscience. *Therefore the subjective rule of our life must be brought increasingly into agreement with the objective one made known to us in God's revelation.* With increasing measure, Christ must become the content of our conscience. He makes our conscience first genuinely free, independent of all external authority, and makes the law of our own personality correspond with God's holy will.[48]

It is explicit that the normal function of conscience hinges upon divine revelation, that is, upon the revealed law. In this regard, Bavinck resonates with

and in which the Holy Spirit himself bears witness (1 Tim 1:19; 1 Pet 2:19; Rom 9:1)." Bavinck, "Conscience," 118.

[45] Bavinck, *RE1*, 176.

[46] Bavinck, *RE1*, 174.

[47] Bavinck, "Conscience," 118–19.

[48] Bavinck, "Conscience," 126; emphasis added.

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John Calvin, who integrates freedom of conscience with the bondage of conscience to God's law.[49] Meanwhile, it should be kept in mind that, for Bavinck, the human being receives God's revelation by faith alone.[50] Hence, the affinity of conscience and faith is objectively determined by God's revelation; thereby, freedom of conscience depends on faith and, ultimately, on God's self-revelation.

The aforementioned three observations showcase the close connection between conscience and faith, which cogently demonstrates Bavinck's stance that conscience's religious nature takes precedence over its moral nature. In turn, they prove the affinity of conscience and the ecclesial confession of faith. Following this, we arrive at the corollary that a good conscience must force the human agent to practice confessional allegiance to the church. Nevertheless, one may ask: How can Bavinck, who upholds the freedom and divine oracular character of conscience, have the human conscience restrained by the ecclesial confession that is authored by humans? In response to this question, we now turn to Bavinck's nuanced deployment of freedom of conscience in the human subscription to ecclesial confessions.

Confessional Allegiance and Freedom of Conscience

Bavinck's insistence on confessional allegiance does not lead to ecclesial authoritarianism. Ecclesial confessions do not underwrite the church's claim for an absolute rule over its members. This is so because, for Bavinck, the power that the church receives from Christ is not "authoritarian, independent, sovereign" but rather derived and bound to Christ.[51] As such, confessional allegiance not only testifies to a believer's commitment to the church but also bears testimony to her obedience to Christ.

Bavinck's anti-authoritarian ecclesiology and his emphasis on the priority of obedience to God safeguard the importance of freedom of conscience for one's subscription to the ecclesial confession. By doing so, the inclination to absolutize an ecclesial confession needs to be eradicated. Bavinck even describes such absolutization as antithetical to the integrity and authenticity of the church. He contends:

> And to stay in one's own church despite much impurity in doctrine and life is our duty *as long as it does not prevent us from being faithful to our own confession* and does not force us, even indirectly, to obey humans more

[49] See Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.10.4.
[50] See Bavinck, *RD*, 1.89–95.
[51] Bavinck, *RD*, 4.394–95.

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> than God. For a church that pressured its members to do that would, at that very moment and to the extent it did that, *reveal itself to the conscience of its members as a false church*, which accorded itself and its ordinances more power and authority than *the Word of God*.[52]

Although Bavinck's concern in this passage is about the unity of the church and impurity in ecclesial doctrines and life, it is nevertheless clear that he brings the idea of conscience to the foreground while speaking of the believer's relationship with such an impure church. The phrase "our own confession" implies that the believer's personal confession could somehow be separated from her ecclesial confession. Moreover, conjoining this phrase and the idea of conscience that follows immediately in the previous passage, it could be argued that the individual confession and the ecclesial one are to some extent independent of each other.

A question arises here: Does Bavinck adopt a relativistic approach to retaining both one's freedom of conscience and the ecclesial confession? Bavinck's emphasis on the authority of the word of God gives us a hint at responding to the charge of relativism. Indeed, confession of faith is tied up with the church from the beginning. However, this does not mean that confession is part of the essence of the church. Rather, Bavinck identifies the essence of the church as pertinent to the word of God. He contends, "For the believers, *who make up the essence of the church*, are manifest in two ways: in the administration of Word and sacrament that takes place among them, and in the witness and walk by which they distinguish themselves from the world as well as from other churches."[53] At first glance, it seems that Bavinck identifies the true believers as the sole constituent of the essence of the church.[54] However, a closer examination will show that it is not the believers but *what the believers believe and confess and act out* that constitutes the essence of the church. This observation is in line with Bavinck's contention that the church rests upon the word of God. "Without the Word of God, after all, there would be no church.... All ministry in the

[52] Bavinck, *RD*, 4.319; emphasis added. Bavinck's neo-Calvinist colleague Abraham Kuyper argues in a similar way while elaborating on the relationship between believers and the institutional church: "(1) [the believers'] freedom to assemble, deliberate, and decide; (2) their will and declaration to bind themselves in this formation; (3) agreement between their formative act and the demand of God's Word; and therefore (4) the duty and freedom to sever this bond personally as soon as such a bond would impede their obedience to God's Word." Abraham Kuyper, *On the Church*, ed. Jordan J. Ballor et al., trans. Harry Van Dyke et al., Abraham Kuyper Collected Works in Public Theology (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 110.

[53] Bavinck, *RD*, 4.314; emphasis added.

[54] Also see Bavinck, *RD*, 4.307, 4.313.

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church is a ministry of the Word. God gives his Word to the church, and the church accepts, preserves, administers, and teaches it; *it confesses it before God, before one another, and before the world in word and deed*."[55] It is clear that, for Bavinck, the true believers who are qualified by their confession of *the word of God* make up the essence of the church. As such, although confession is not the essence of the church, the confession of the word of God is the instrument by which the essence becomes manifest.

By arguing for the freedom of conscience in confessional allegiance, Bavinck's purport is to defend the power and authority of the word of God against the authoritarian and legalistic application of the ecclesial confession. In this respect, Bavinck strikes a chord with Thomas F. Torrance (1913–2007), who resolutely criticizes a legalistic approach to the ecclesial confession. In dealing with the application of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* in the church, Torrance cautions against identifying the *Confession* as the truth of God. He puts it well:

> Rejection of that view implied the relativisation of the formulations presented in the *Westminster Confession* before the objective truths to which they referred. In this event a distinction between the substance of the Faith and its dogmatic formulations was called for, in adoring respect for the Truth of God revealed in Jesus Christ which far transcends human conceptions and expressions of it, and in order to guard its objective reality and character from time-conditioned, distorting interpretations of it in the mission of the Church.[56]

Both Bavinck and Torrance take some sort of relativization but are not trapped in relativism. The reality of God's revelation ensures that the human expressions and interpretations of truth can be relativized without belittling the absoluteness of truth *per se*.

Having demonstrated Bavinck's insistence on both freedom of conscience and confessional allegiance, the *modus operandi* of conscience in confessional allegiance remains to be explored. As will be seen, this point is underdeveloped in Bavinck's dogmatic system. In what follows, I will demonstrate that Bavinck's conception of dynamic conscience can be used to underwrite one's reception of an ecclesial confession with a free conscience.

Bavinck's conception of dynamic conscience becomes clear in his endeavor to figure out the relationship between the human conscience and intellect according to the Protestant tradition. Through the etymological

[55] Bavinck, *RD*, 4.312; emphasis added.

[56] T. F. Torrance, "The Deposit of Faith," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 36, no. 1 (1983): 26. For a helpful analysis of this article, see Paul D. Molnar, *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 36–38.

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analysis of the Dutch *geweten* (conscience), Bavinck clarifies that the conscience "is a knowing-with-oneself." Then he goes on to explore the function of conscience in the sphere of intellect. In this regard, a division is drawn by Bavinck within human knowing. While one facet of knowing is moving toward truth and is characterized as being theoretical, the other is practical and actualizing truth. The two aspects of knowing operate under the control of human intellect.[57] This means that the healthy intellect must coordinate the theoretical and practical operations. Bavinck's elaboration on the two aspects of knowing makes it clear how the human conscience operates with God's law. Specifically, the divine law has both theoretical and practical purposes, which means that the law should be theoretically known and practically actualized. Following this, Bavinck contends:

> Conscience is not, however, a distinct capacity alongside others, but "the intellect itself ordered to specific actions." Naturally, we always possess the faculty, the capacity, to evaluate our actions (otherwise we couldn't); however, that is not a distinct capacity alongside others but belongs to the intellect itself. *Thus the conscience is an act, a deed, an activity, flowing forth, however, from a disposition or habit.*[58]

He makes it plain that the conscience is not something static within the human being. Rather, it is dynamic and acting. Hence, by the phrase "freedom of conscience," Bavinck refers not merely to a free state but, more importantly, to a free action.

Bavinck's explication of how the conscience renders judgment enhances the dynamic character of conscience. As per his stance, with the major (the law or word of God) and the minor (consciousness) premises, the conscience concludes with either accusing (*beschuldigend*) or exonerating (*ontschuldigend*).[59] This means that the function of conscience is not transient; instead, the conscience continues to operate alongside human actions. The conscience is always acting by accusation or exoneration so as to actualize its adherence to the divine law. This dynamic character is supportive of our understanding of Bavinck's view of freedom of conscience.

In addition, while concluding his discourse on the human conscience with the notion of freedom, Bavinck stresses the dynamic nature of the operation of conscience. As noted earlier, the human conscience draws a corollary according to two premises—the divine law and consciousness—which shows that individualization is typical of the operation of conscience. As

[57] Bavinck, *RE1*, 193.

[58] Bavinck, *RE1*, 195; emphasis added.

[59] See Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Ethiek, Eerste Deel*, 149; cf. Bavinck, *RE1*, 203.

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such, an individual's appropriation of God's law is personal, which brings forth one's particular actions. However different human actions are, humans are judged under the authority of God's law. For Bavinck, this lays the foundation for freedom of conscience. He contends, "Whoever sins against conscience believes that *a sin is being committed* against God and his law. Freedom of conscience flows from our recognition of this reality."[60] Accordingly, Bavinck's concern here is not about freedom of conscience itself but rather about the authority of God and the divine law.

That being so, the divine authority grounds the actualization of freedom of conscience. On the one hand, Bavinck cautions that every person's conscience should be respected as *sacred*. On the other hand, all earthly authority, including ecclesial and political authority, cannot impose hegemonic restraints on the human conscience.[61] As such, we get to capture the sense in which the true believer subscribes to the ecclesial confession of the church with a free conscience. That is, inasmuch as the word of God is the major premise of the operation of her conscience, and inasmuch as the Spirit's testimony in Holy Scripture, the church, and the human being is singular (as has been demonstrated previously), her confessional allegiance with a free conscience properly and aptly shows her confessing the word of God and God's authority to which the Spirit bears testimony.

It is worth pausing here to consider church discipline. How can church discipline not violate freedom of conscience? Can a believer resist church discipline by claiming for freedom of conscience? Through the aforementioned analysis, it comes to be seen that freedom of conscience is not unlimited but rather subject to the authoritative word of God. In like manner, Bavinck contends that church discipline should be guided by the word of God insofar as it is pertinent to the application of the Word in the believer's daily life.[62] As such, the believer's obedience to Word-guided church discipline must be in tune with her freedom of conscience that is obedient to the Word. After all, for Bavinck, the religious nature of conscience takes precedence over its moral nature. This harmony between freedom of conscience and church discipline stresses that every confessional church should insist on its rule of life according to the word of God that it confesses.

In this sense, confessional allegiance with a free conscience does not emphasize how to confess freely; instead, it showcases how the conscience truly operates in free confession and how confession of faith is truly practiced with the sanctified conscience in its obedience to the word of God. As such,

[60] Bavinck, *RE1*, 213; emphasis added.
[61] See Bavinck, *RE1*, 213–14.
[62] See Bavinck, *RD*, 4.421–27.

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the dynamic operation of conscience underwrites that the believer's confession of faith is not a once-and-for-all subscription to the confessional texts of the church. In fact, the confession of faith is *confessing* faith that is concomitant with human actions in daily life. It is to this topic that we are turning now.

Actualized Confession of Faith

It is the dynamic idiosyncrasy of freedom of conscience that benefits the contemporary theological agenda on ecclesial confession. Bavinck's emphasis on divine authority discloses his conviction that the God-oriented freedom of conscience penetrates into human action. "[Conscience] is the law of our own personality, which accuses us, and does so with regard to not simply some actions or words or thoughts, but often our entire selves, our entire personality, the entire empirical I."[63]

I would like to take Bavinck's argument further. Now that the dynamic nature of freedom of conscience is simultaneous with human action, one's confessional allegiance hinges upon *confessing* with a conscience that is *accusing* or *exonerating*. Given this, we need to reconsider the essence of ecclesial confession, and the believer's confession must go beyond the *static* subscription to the formal confession or confessional text documented by the church. By the term "static," I do not mean that ecclesial confessions always remain unchanged in history.[64] Instead, the term "static" refers to the believer's preoccupation with the literal confession such that her conscience is bound by the written form of ecclesial confession. Over against such static subscription, confession of faith should be dynamic in such a way that the believer is *confessing* through and through.

Static adherence to confessional documents must be supplemented by dynamic confessing.[65] A confessional text and a confessing action must coalesce into the actualized confession of faith, which means a movement from one-sided stress on doctrinal and conceptual reception of ecclesial

[63] Bavinck, "Conscience," 124.

[64] A remarkable example is the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. The *Westminster Confession*, which was approved by the Church of Scotland on August 27, 1647, was revised by the Presbyterian Church USA. A comparison between the original *Westminster Confession* and the one revised and inherited by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (descended from the Presbyterian Church USA) can be seen on "American Revisions to the Westminster Confession of Faith," https://www.opc.org/documents/WCF_orig.html.

[65] See Jason S. Sexton, "Confessional Theology in Public Places," *International Journal of Public Theology* 10 (2016): 243.

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confessions to the integration of the practical with the theoretical properly. To put it differently, based on the dynamic nature of conscience as demonstrated previously, actualized confession shows that the believer's life as a whole, incorporating both the life in the faith community and the life in the world, should involve confessing faith. As such, the idea of confessing faith differs from the slogan "Doctrine divides, while service unites," which was proposed at the World Conference of Life and Work held under the leadership of Nathan Söderblom. This slogan attempted to achieve the ecumenical unity by leaving out doctrinal differences. By contrast, confessing faith presupposes doctrinal differences between various denominations as stated in their confessional texts. Confessing faith acknowledges the diversity of confessional texts because, as has been elucidated earlier, ecclesial confessions are the fruits of the Spirit's work throughout the centuries.

In fact, the coalescence of confessing faith and subscription to confessional texts fits in well with Bavinck's thought and his theological and ecclesiastical milieus. In his early career, Bavinck has pointed out that Reformed confessions originally served as symbols to unite churches, which discloses the fact that they lack theologically scientific definiteness and sharpness and are incapable of covering the whole of life. Nonetheless, Reformed confessions have already incorporated the principles regarding the most important part of human life. Therefore, Bavinck exhorted his fellow seceders from the Christian Reformed Church to develop and apply these powerful principles to particular circumstances of life.[66] His primary concern is about how the subscription to ecclesial confessional texts can be actualized in specific contexts of life, that is, confessing faith. Without such actualization, for Bavinck, confession of faith is inanimate.

On December 17, 1902, while taking the post of professor of theology at the Free University in Amsterdam, Bavinck's inaugural address offered a more concrete account of the actualized confession of faith in academia. Bavinck asserts that the theologian cannot undertake theological inquiries as a value-free person. Like every academic who must be subject to her own living conditions, the theologian is "a member of a particular church and raised in a clearly defined confession" in terms of religious condition.[67] By identifying the ecclesial confession as the departure point for the theologian's work, Bavinck is *de facto* to illustrate that every believer's life is associated with and even influenced by her faith. On this score, all believers, including theologians, need be confessing their faith in every sphere of life.

[66] Bavinck, "De Wetenschappelijke Roeping Onzer Kerk," 103–04.

[67] Herman Bavinck, "Herman Bavinck's Religion and Theology: A Translation," trans. Bruce Pass, *Reformed Theological Review* 77, no. 2 (2018): 129.

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By doing so, the believer's life shows that "the Christian religion brings with it a unique, completely new view of heaven and earth, world and humanity, nature and history, science and art, state and society, life and destiny, sin and death, and eternity and judgment."[68] Historically, this assertion coincided with Bavinck's critique of his fellow seceders, who were conservative and argued that genuine theology cannot be practiced in the university. Their separatist spirit prevented them from actualizing Reformed confessions in the circle of science (*wetenschap*). Combining this historical factor with Bavinck's viewpoint, it is clear that, for Bavinck, the principles embedded in ecclesial confessions should be actualized in every sphere of human life, both inside and outside the church.

The idea of actualized confession of faith, being developed out of Bavinck's theology, does not imply that Protestant churches overlook the practical aspects of confession. Classical Protestant confessions of faith contain numerous teachings on the Christian life, concerning both the religious and the civil. Nonetheless, two distinctions can be made between the classical Protestant notion of confession and actualized confession of faith. First, the *Sitz im Leben* of classical Protestant confessions was Christendom, where ecclesial confessions normally conjoined the religious and civil life.[69] By contrast, Bavinck lived in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, the time when the rip in the relationship between Christianity and political and civil life came to the fore. Given the change of historical contexts, actualized confession of faith means that the believer should place her entire life under the authority of the word of God. The rupture of the connection between Christianity and public life, which has already occurred in Bavinck's days and continued to widen, should not hinder the believer from confessing faith in her life as a whole.

Second, classical Protestant confessions and actualized confession of faith have slightly different intentions. According to Michael Allen, "Reformed confessions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were envisioned as serving a fundamental role as an authority subservient to God's scriptural Word and formative of God's ecclesial community."[70] Added to this ecclesial communal intention, actualized confession of faith intends to induce an

[68] Bavinck, "Herman Bavinck's Religion and Theology," 118.

[69] For example, the Second Helvetic Confession (1566) elaborates on a Reformed view of magistracy in chapter 30, and the London Confession (1646) in Article 48. Although religion was not imposed on individuals in the Netherlands of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Protestant confessional texts at the time doubtlessly reflect the close connection between religion and civil life.

[70] Michael Allen, "Confessions," in *Cambridge Companion to Reformed Theology*, ed. Paul Nimmo and David Fergusson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 42.

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individual believer's response to the word of God. As has been seen in Bavinck's system, actualized confession is married with the conscience that is highly individualized. As such, actualized confession of faith with a free conscience serves not merely to build the ecclesial community but also to nurture and guide each believer to confess faith in daily life. Note that the individual is as important as the communal. What is confessed is received with a free conscience and then actualized in daily life. In other words, the letters and words on the confessional texts—which consist of articles of faith and are authored by the church—need to be animated to enter real life, which necessitates the operation of conscience in agreement with the word of God. As Abraham Kuyper argues, "We therefore understand the believers, as the instrument of church formation, to be the people who by their pure confession of God's truth and their honorable walk of life manifest themselves publicly as believers."[71] Needless to say, Kuyper's claim reflects the coalescence of one's life and confession of faith—that is, actualized confession of faith—which is critical to the establishment of the institutional church and the formation of ecclesial confession. As such, actualized confession of faith must give birth to confessional life, or better, life in confessing.[72]

> This person [is confessing] (*belijdt*) in the supporting of the public worship of the church, in the act of Christian aid, in the promoting of education, in the care for the poor, in the visitation of the prisoner, in the clothing of the naked, in the feeding of the hungry, in the comforting of the mourning, in the admonition of the unruly, in refutation of opponents, in the giving of an account of the hope that lies within, in keeping oneself unspotted from the world. Whoever [is believing] (*gelooft*) [is confessing] (*belijdt*), and that person's life itself becomes a confession—a living, holy offering in [Jesus] Christ that is pleasing to God.[73]

Actualized confession of faith with a free conscience is governing the entire life, integrating all aspects of life as a whole to be offered to God. By doing so, the individual believer mediates the church's ministry of the word of

[71] Kuyper, *On the Church*, 110.

[72] Karl Barth argues in a similar way with reference to the church: "I prefer to say 'confessing church' rather than confessional church, because a confession is only on paper, while confessing is an action!." Karl Barth, *Barth in Conversation*, vol. 1, *1959–1962*, ed. Darrell L. Guder and Eberhard Busch, trans. The Translation Fellows of the Center for Barth Studies, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 138.

[73] Bavinck, *The Sacrifice of Praise*, 36–37; Herman Bavinck, *De offerande des lofs. Overdenkingen vóór en na de toelating tot het heilige avondmaal*, 10th ed., rev. trans. (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1920), 37.

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God to the public in her ordinary life.[74] This is explicitly resonant with Barth's doxological account of confession in a person's life: "A man's praise of God, and therefore *his confession and witness to Him*, is often enough recounted in the Bible as the simple moment of a particular history. And if we are obedient to God's requirement of our confession, then necessarily, not dissolving but affirming the general bearing of this claim, it will be realized in definite moments of our own history."[75] These "definite moments" are not some discrete moments that occasionally occur in the history of one's life. Rather, they are *Kairos* moments when the believer glorifies God by confessing her faith, which fills up her life.

Furthermore, actualized confession of faith puts an end to ecclesial authoritarianism in the practice of ecclesial confession in such a way that confessing *per se* is a sacrifice presented to God. Hence, rather than coercing one's confessional allegiance, "[the church] listens attentively to the objections that may be advanced on the basis of God's Word against its confession and examines them as the confession itself requires."[76] In so doing, the church's ministry of the word of God continues to be reformed since the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti* is conveyed simultaneously to the ecclesial community and individual believers.

By rejecting ecclesial authoritarianism, actualized confession enables us to push forward ecumenism. Eduardus Van der Borght observes that, with text-based concern, "the ecumenical movement bases itself on the assumption

[74] In my view, this action of confessing squarely corresponds to Sexton's view of public Christianity: "Public Christianity is public then not as it propagates a better hegemony, but insofar as it 'touches' or carries potentiality to 'touch' others in every sphere of society and in any culture with the reality of its hope, shaped then by particular cultural expressions but also anchored in a revealed reality and translated by the Spirit. And here it makes way for being both a stumbling block and foolishness to others, and yet being the very power of God unto salvation for all who believe, entailing something that only the Holy Spirit truly enables." Sexton, "Confessional Theology in Public Places," 35.

[75] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3, *The Doctrine of Creation, Part 4*, ed. Geoffrey William Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. A. T. Mackay et al. (London: Bloomsburry T&T Clark, 2004), 7475; emphasis added. Barth relates this history of the human being to the covenant between God and humans: "In other words, this is neither more nor less than a matter of man's service in relation to the history of the covenant which is the meaning and inner basis of creation. This history must not only take place; it must also be attested. God as the Lord of this history not only wants man to be the object of His action and the recipient of His blessings, but also to have him as a responsible partner" (75).

[76] Bavinck, *RD*, 4.421. Immediately, Bavinck clarifies that "only it refuses and has to refuse to degrade itself into a debating club or a philosophical society in which what was a lie yesterday passes for truth today. It is not like a wave of the sea but like a rock, a pillar and foundation of the truth."

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that in a conciliar process it can help churches to rediscover and strengthen the consensus that had been given to them in their attachment to Christ."[77] Accordingly, the modern ecumenical movement cannot sidestep the issue regarding confessional differences between churches. In this respect, Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen is on the mark when she cautions that the ecumenical movement should not lapse into the morass of uniformity, which aims to obliterate the differences between churches. She contends, "A differentiated consensus allows for and even welcomes difference on the level of ecclesial perceptions and church life, while at the same time it can transcend and accept difference in a larger consensus. Different views can be compatible with and even complementary to one another and thus integrate into a more comprehensive picture."[78] She cites *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999), signed by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, as one example in support of such a differentiated consensus. Granted, the consensus of ecclesial confessional texts is intriguing insofar as a sort of visible unity seems to coincide much more with the spirit of the ecumenical movement. Nonetheless, as Bavinck has argued:

> However distinguished the written confession is, it can never be severed from personal faith, nor can it ever be torn apart from its connection to the testimonies and deeds with which the church distinguishes itself from and places itself in opposition to the world. It is not a document that binds us because of its honored antiquity. It bears no authority that is laid upon us by the distant past. But it is borne and inspired from moment to moment by the faith of the church.[79]

Accordingly, the consensus of confessional texts runs the risk of placing the present in subordination to the past such that churches might be incapable of confessing faith in union here and now. In fact, the ecumenical movement has already been aware that the past needs to be subordinate to the present. This has already been implied in the *Joint Declaration*: "[The *Declaration*] does not cover all that either church teaches about justification; it does encompass a consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification and shows that the remaining differences in its explication are no longer the

[77] Eduardus Van der Borght, *Theology of Ministry: A Reformed Contribution to an Ecumenical Dialogue* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2007), 154.

[78] Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, "Seeking Unity: Reflecting on Methods in Contemporary Ecumenical Dialogue," in *Ecumenical Ecclesiology: Unity, Diversity and Otherness in a Fragmented World*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2009), 37.

[79] Bavinck, *The Sacrifice of Praise*, 64.

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occasion for doctrinal condemnations."[80] The *Declaration* makes it clear that what caused mutual doctrinal condemnations there and then is subordinate to the consensus reached here and now.

The emphasis on "here and now" is essential to the idea of actualized confession of faith. That is, actualized confession of faith accentuates that the believer is confessing her faith in every sphere of life here and now. Nevertheless, the *Joint Declaration* stops at the "here and now" that is based on the text-based consensus. By borrowing Thiessen's term "differentiated consensus," I aim to demonstrate that this actualized confession of faith helps us to go beyond such a text-based gesture. Specifically, the idea of differentiated consensus implies the multiplicity of ecclesial confessions. This is in tune with Bavinck's thought insofar as he stresses that the Spirit unfolds the treasures of the word of God in various contexts and consequently produces variegated ecclesial confessions.

The differentiation of ecclesial confessions is the blessing to the church and believers, and the attempt at the absolute visible unity of ecclesial confessions is actually oblivious to the abundance of the word of God. Given variegated ecclesial confessions, the idea of actualized confession of faith points ecumenism to the hope for the faith unity that cannot be realized right now. As Bavinck asserts, "Today, that confession can be *contradicted* and *opposed*, for it holds a world of invisible things as its contents."[81] Thus, an ultimate ecumenical unity of confession of faith cannot come into being until the Parousia.

That being so, the ecumenical unity *has to* presuppose the diversity of ecclesial confessions and endorses the fact that all believers confess from somewhere. Bavinck suggests that the "differences between innumerable Christian churches and confessions have not been mechanically added to the points of agreement."[82] Immediately, he stresses that in this diversity lies the unity of Christian faith. He argues, "Although written confessions often limit themselves to the exposition of differences, in the unwritten articles, the prayers, the fruits of faith, and the works of mercy a striking harmony comes to light. The flawed confession of the lips very often fails to do justice to the faith of the heart."[83] From this unity-in-diversity, it can be seen that the differentiated consensus safeguards the believer's confessing

[80] The Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification: 20th Anniversary Edition* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2019), 9, https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2021/documents/joint_declaration_2019_en.pdf.

[81] Bavinck, *The Sacrifice of Praise*, 86; emphasis added.

[82] Bavinck, *The Sacrifice of Praise*, 49.

[83] Bavinck, *The Sacrifice of Praise*, 50.

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faith with a free conscience (transformed in faith in Christ) in her participation in the ecumenical movement. On the one hand, the believer can subscribe with a free conscience to her own ecclesial confession. On the other hand, in the course of confessing faith, the believer's conscience is not under the yoke of either her own ecclesial confession or the consensus confession of faith; instead, her confessing faith is obedient to the word of God alone. That is, by confessing faith, the individual believer mediates the church's ministry of the word of God to the public in her ordinary life. This carves out a buffer zone in the ecumenical dialogue. None of the ecclesial confessions predominate in the ecumenical movement, and all confessions—being authored there and then—together serve for the believer's confessing faith. In this light, the ecumenical movement becomes the instrument through which the believer is confessing faith and mediating the abundant word of God into every sphere of life here and now.

Although the difference on the level of ecclesial perceptions and church life is manifest in the divergences of confessional texts, actualized confession of faith is conducive to assimilate that difference into the consensus of confessing faith in Christ in both ecclesial and public life. At this point, we need to recall Bavinck's view of the connection between faith and conscience: If the faith in Christ influences the whole human existence, Christ's benefits received by faith must penetrate the human person, including the human conscience. Given that the believer's cleansed conscience points her to Christ, all believers, whichever ecclesial confessions they subscribe to, are confessing faith with a free conscience here and now. Viewed in this light, actualized confession of faith construes the differentiated consensus of the ecumenical movement as dynamic, which connotes the consensus-in-distinction of various ecclesial confessional texts and distinction-in-consensus of united confessing faith. In the end, ecumenism is the precisely universal actualized confession of faith—that is, from their own ecclesial contexts, all believers are confessing faith in Christ with a free conscience in every sphere of life.

Conclusion

The retrieval of Bavinck's theology of confession in this article brings forth the idea of confessing faith, which concatenates the individual believer's confession, a particular church's confession, and the ecumenical movement. Through this analysis, it can be seen that these three are interrelated.

The church is intrinsically confessional. This is so because the Spirit's threefold testimony in Holy Scripture, the church, and the human being

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make up a holistic unity. As such, the confessionality of the church cannot be fully actualized without taking freedom of conscience into consideration. As derived from the human interpretation of the word of God, ecclesial confessions should not arrest the response of conscience to the word of God.

By virtue of the work of the Holy Spirit, the human conscience and the ecclesial confession are always in harmony somehow. Given that the conscience is always acting (accusing or exonerating) freely according to the word of God and has a bearing on the human external action, the believer's subscription to the ecclesial confession should not be coerced. This does not mean that the individual person's autonomy overpowers the authority of the church. Neither does this undermine the practice of church discipline. Ecclesial authority is not at stake, even though freedom of conscience is highly emphasized, provided that the church is faithful to the ministry of the word of God and has the Word-oriented church discipline. This is so for the reason that it is the Holy Spirit who makes the conscience free to respond to the word of God and guides the church to bear testimony to the word of God throughout centuries.

Moreover, the believer's subscription to the ecclesial confession is not a once-and-for-all act. Rather, the believer's confession of faith is an *actualized confession of faith* with a free conscience, which orients the human existence toward God. That is to say, actualized confession of faith involves the human life as a whole. This observation reminds the contemporary church to reconsider the praxis of confessional allegiance. Confessional allegiance is not merely the subscription to particular confessional *texts*; neither is it guaranteed by the ecclesial authority. Rather, it is the fruit of the believer's *confessing faith* as the response to the church's ministry of the word of God, and in the end, to the word of God itself. Thereby, the dynamic character of confessing faith reminds the proponents of the ecumenical movement that ecumenism cannot be merely text based but is tied up with individual believers themselves. More importantly, the ecumenical movement should take shape in the differentiated consensus, that is, assimilating the differentiation of confessional texts being made there and then into the consensus of confessing faith in Christ reached here and now.

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