

The Diversity of Contemporary Reformed Theology: A New Encyclopedic Introduction with a Case Study

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Abstract

Evangelical Protestantism in North America has undergone considerable evolution in the last century. One of the most notable movements is a resurgence of “reformed theology” and, along with it, the use of countless labels, such as “new Calvinism,” “Neocalvinism,” “Continental Calvinism,” “the Young, Restless, and Reformed” (YRR), “Four-Point Calvinists,” “Reformed Baptists,” “Confessionally Reformed,” “1689ers,” “Reformational,” “presuppositionalists,” etc. Internal debate rages about who is “truly reformed” and what makes this the case. This article develops an original, encyclopedic introduction to contemporary reformed thought in four streams: (1) Confessional Reformed, (2) Calvinist Baptist, (3) Neocalvinist, and (4) Progressive Reformed, identifying the basic ideas, schools, figures, and systematic theologies within each group. It also identifies substantial differences between them, using bibliology as a case study.

Introduction

“Are you reformed?”

This is a question many Christians in North America have been asked in recent times. While the answer is clear for some, it is not for others. Consider the following scenarios:

- A Baptist church in the Midwest splits because of “the doctrines of grace,” which is “the heart of reformed theology.”
- A college application contains a drop-down menu for religious affiliation, which contains “Reformed,” “Presbyterian,” and “Lutheran,” all as separate entries.

- A seminary professor gets fired for compromising the tenets of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, which is considered a “reformed” doctrine of Scripture.
- A local church that is “trying to be more reformed” refuses to play any instruments that aren’t mentioned in the Bible.
- A liberal arts college prohibits faculty drinking with students to enforce its “reformed” identity—while another college *allows* it on the same basis.
- As a “reformed” group, one Presbyterian denomination allows ordained ministers to marry gay couples and sees no threats of its pastors embracing theistic evolution.
- As a “reformed” group, a (different) Presbyterian denomination prohibits such marriages and refuses to ordain anyone who is not young-earth creationist.

Clearly, the term “reformed” is not as meaningful and/or precise as many imagine. As a result, many have searched for clarity,¹ while others try to set the record straight.²

However, I suggest that many of these projects point in the wrong direction.³ Instead of confronting the diversity of reformed theology, providing a meaningful explanation, and offering a thoughtful response, the debate is often whitewashed in order to proliferate a particular (“reformed”) ideology. This reaction is more or less a power play—yet another attempt at monopolizing the “reformed” label once and for all to favor a particular group. Genuine variety is covered up, reduced,

1 This is in addition to all the regular infighting within “reformed” denominations and organizations (e.g., the popular rise and fall of professor and pastor members of “The Gospel Coalition,” gender and LGBTQI+ debates, countless one-man “reformed” apologetics organizations, tense denominational conflicts over “Federal Vision,” the heated exchanges over “two-kingdom theology,” economics/racism/environmentalism, etc.).

2 E.g., R. C. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016); John Piper, *The Five Points: Towards a Deeper Understanding of God’s Grace* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2013); R. Michael Allen, *Reformed Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010); James Boyce and Philip Graham Ryken, *The Doctrines of Grace: Rediscovering the Evangelical Gospel* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009); Michael Horton, *Putting Amazing Back Into Grace: Embracing the Heart of the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011). Cf. more advanced works, such as Matthew C. Bingham et al., *On Being Reformed* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) and, with generally a more inclusive perspective, Oliver Crisp, *Deviant Calvinism: Broadening Reformed Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014).

3 This article emerges from my own experience in both academia and in the church. In academia, it emerges from studying theology at Dordt University, Reformed Theological Seminary, and the University of South Africa under a Roman Catholic nun from Zimbabwe (producing, nevertheless, an explicitly “reformed” dissertation). In the church, it emerges from teaching, preaching, and/or attending a variety of “reformed” churches, whether Confessional Reformed Baptist, PCA, PCUSA, Southern Baptist (of an explicitly Calvinist orientation), or otherwise. Jessica (my spouse) has a similar history, being raised Baptist Calvinist and having graduated from Westminster Theological Seminary’s Christian Counseling and Education Foundation (CCEF). We currently attend a UCC church (which has roots in the “German Reformed”).

and sanitized through a superficial filter, which has no room for variation or honest questions. This makes things more stressful for onlookers, who are then left with a false sense of knowledge that eventually gains popularity (typically in the name of “sound doctrine,” “biblical truth,” or whatever discourse is trendy at the time). Worse, victims of these tactics are left incapable of building meaningful relationships with other Christians—even within the same broader theological tradition. This creates separatism and a culture of superiority (“we’re the *real* reformed Christians”—or worse, “we’re the *real Christians*”).⁴

The purpose of this article is to confront and understand the theological diversity that exists. Unity was Jesus’s goal in the “High Priestly Prayer” of John 17.⁵ And genuine unity comes from (at least) intentional tolerance of acknowledged difference, not premature *dismissals* of difference, real or imagined.

This project is not a historical genealogy. Rather, the question is, *if one were to try to identify the varieties of “reformed theology” here and now, what might this look like?* I propose four major strands (with a kind of “control variable” as a fifth):

1. Confessional Reformed
2. Calvinist Baptist
3. Neocalvinist
4. Progressive Reformed
5. The Theology of the Reformers (*control*)

The main (first) four categories are built like a net to catch most of the “reformed theologies” in contemporary North America. Some fish will naturally escape.⁶ But, similar to Edward Klink and Darian Lockett in *Understanding Biblical Theology* (who offer five synthetic “types of biblical theology”), this particular organization is designed as a “heuristic schema.”⁷ It avoids confusing etiologies and cuts to the point.⁸ However, as I will argue, these five categories are *more* than a heuristic tool.

4 Case studies abound in popular media rhetoric. For example, the fundamentalist pastors and YouTube personalities James R. White and Jeff Durbin (Apologia Church) habitually refer to other fellow Confessional Reformed Baptists as “the brethren,” while other Christians as “professing Christians.” This practice (in this context) galvanizes and validates one’s own religious identity while efficiently calling the legitimacy of others into question.

5 The implications of this text in ecumenism were first brought to my attention by the RCA Pastor John Armstrong in personal conversations and in his book *Your Church is Too Small* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

6 This includes Lutherans and Anglicans. Regarding the former, this exclusion is largely due to a distinction that took place early on (a) between Luther and Melancthon, (b) between Calvin and Luther, and (c) between Zwingli and the work of other reformers. Together, these divergences (combined with differences in geography and demographics) forged a considerable gap between the “Lutherans” and the “Calvinists,” and between “the Presbyterians” (following Calvin) and “the Reformed” (following Zwingli).

7 Edward Klink III and Darian Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 20–21.

8 Klink and Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology*, 20–21: “Even if a reader may want to adjust the position of one of the types (or their modern examples), the construct presents a useful tool.”

They are authentic streams of thought with institutional, literary, and denominational representation.⁹

The fifth category, the “theology of the reformers,” means “primarily the thought of Martin Luther and John Calvin.” Most readers will find this point uncontroversial. Theology evolves and can traverse great distances. Other readers, however, will be confused. Many self-proclaimed “reformed” Christians are convinced that their version of “reformed theology” is synonymous with “the theology of the reformers.” The two cannot be distinguished. On the contrary, one of the implications of this article is that the “theology of the reformers” is not even genuinely represented in many or most of today’s embodiments of “reformed theology.”¹⁰ So, while one will find plenty of “Calvinists” and “Lutherans” at the local pub, one will be hard-pressed to find an individual, a denomination, or a large institutional representation of “reformed theology” if we mean “the theology of Calvin and Luther.”

There are other qualifications about this project. First, it is evident that many “differences” in theology may turn out not to be differences at all. Especially when looking for them, differences in detail can be hazardously manufactured as evidence for digression. I consciously avoid this problem. Furthermore, the post-modern and linguistic turn have shown that debates about what is “true” are frequently the result of *competing discourses* and not simply incompatible propositions. Difference need not mean competition. Finally, there are many ways of explaining the same experience. If my view of a mountain is different than yours, maybe we are looking at a different mountain—or maybe we are looking at the same mountain from different viewpoints.¹¹

Second, not all reformed theologians conceive of theology in the same way. For many of the “reformed,” “theology” means “doctrine,” and “doctrine” means

9 It would be fair and appropriate to add sub-categories under each of these groups. But this proved too complicated.

10 There is (for example) a substantial difference between the “theology of Calvin” as found in his sixteenth century writings and “Calvinism” today. The same goes for “the theology of Luther” and “Lutheranism” today.

11 Cognitive linguistics has made some interesting contributions here. For instance, Stephen Shaver, “Eucharistic Spirituality and Metaphoric Asymmetry,” in *Putting God on the Map: Theology and Conceptual Mapping*, ed. Erin Kidd and Karl Rinderknecht (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), 150–51: “Zwingli had come to believe that the Synoptic/Pauline words of institution must be figurative—which meant to him that they could be translated into an underlying literal equivalent: ‘This signifies my body.’ Neither Luther nor Zwingli questioned an assumption they both shared: that only literal language is adequate to express proper truth claims. . . . Both parties assumed that to agree that the words of institution contained a metaphor would be to agree that they were not, strictly speaking, true, but could rather be translated into an underlying literal equivalent. Recent advances in linguistic study have challenged this assumption. Contemporary developments in cognitive linguistics suggest that metaphor and metonymy are basic functions without which human thought would be profoundly impoverished, and that there is no clearly distinguishable boundary between literal and figurative language, but rather a continuum from more concrete to more abstract concepts—all of which are ultimately grounded in embodied physical experience.”

true propositions or principles derived from biblical revelation. “Good theology,” then, is generally centered upon factual information.¹² Others, however, are trying to run away from this (evidently) reductionistic and modern understanding of theology as fast and far as possible.¹³ Instead of summarizing true propositions and timeless truths of the Bible, “theology” may refer instead to *spirit-directed performance*—because disembodied theology is really no theology at all.¹⁴ Or, as Peter Hodgson argues, theology is a constructive discipline, “rather like sailing” where “the ultimate subject matter...the ‘wind’ that drives the ship—is *God*.”¹⁵ Others, like John Franke, see theology as “an ongoing, second-order, contextual discipline that engages in the task of critical and constructive reflection on the beliefs and practices of the Christian church for the purpose of assisting the community of Christ’s followers in their missional vocation to live as the people of God in the particular social-historical context in which they are situated.”¹⁶ Michael Bird, also taking his cue somewhat from the post-liberal tradition,¹⁷ says that “Theology is the conversation that takes place between family members in the household of faith about what it means to behold and believe in God.”¹⁸

Zooming out even further are three professors from Calvin University, who say that theology is simply “a reasoned account of the God made known in the history of Israel and supremely revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.”¹⁹ Daniel Migliore of Princeton describes theology in primarily interrogative instead of

12 This general definition of theology is espoused in Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), xxv; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 21; R. C. Sproul, *Everyone’s a Theologian* (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust, 2014), 11–12, 25; Robert Culver, *Systematic Theology* (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2005), 29; Cornelius Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2007); John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 76. Cf. Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 23; Bruce Riley Ashford and Keith Whitfield, “Theological Method,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel Akin (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2014); Charles Swindoll and Roy Zuck, eds., *Understanding Christian Theology* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003). Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 1:16–18, sees no difference between “dogmatics” and “systematic theology,” and says that it “deals with the . . . accepted doctrines of the Church.”

13 Cf. Jamin Andreas Hübner, “The Progress (Or Extinction?) of Modern Creationism: A Critical Review of Crossway’s *Theistic Evolution*,” *Canadian-American Theological Review* 7 (2018): 2–55.

14 See Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 260–303.

15 Peter Hodgson, *Winds of the Spirit: A Constructive Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 3.

16 John Franke, *The Character of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 44.

17 See George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1984) and William Placher, *Unapologetic Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989).

18 Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 30.

19 Richard Plantinga, Thomas Thompson, and Matthew Lundberg, *An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

descriptive terms: “theology is not mere repetition of traditional doctrines but a persistent search for the truth to which they point and which they only partially and brokenly express. As continuing inquiry, the spirit of theology is interrogative rather than doctrinaire; it presupposes a readiness to question and to be questioned.”²⁰

All of the above theologians come from some version of “reformed theology” and yet disagree on what “theology” is or is about. Declaring theology be to a summary of the Bible’s teachings is one thing. Declaring it to be public performance, an in-house conversation, a posture of curiosity, linguistic construction driven by the winds of the Spirit, or a theoretical framework of interpretation for a grand story, is quite another.²¹ These different views need not be directly contradictory; they may actually complement one another.²² However, they must also not be simplistically conflated, especially for those who are claiming to simply and authoritatively define theology.

Third and finally, it is clear that the approach of this article is inevitably contingent on the author’s own reading and interpretation of sources. In addition to responding carefully to peer review, I have tried to quote as much as possible from representative theologians themselves to ensure that they do the speaking.²³ My analysis will not be acceptable to everyone.

With these prefaces out of the way, what follows is a new encyclopedic introduction to five varieties of contemporary reformed thought. I take this descriptive approach—followed by a topical case study—because it seemed the most effective way to demonstrate the nature and approach of the different reformed theologies. It is also long overdue given the amount of popular confusion on this entire subject.

20 Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 2.

21 I use “meganarrative” instead of “metanarrative” to avoid the baggage surrounding the latter term (and whether or not it can apply to Christianity). This was a big fuss in Myron Penner, ed., *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005)—bigger than was necessary in my opinion.

22 The differences between reformed theologies also extend beyond the question of *what* and into the question of *who*. Should theologizing be restricted to the church (and which church), or is the task of theology (and the Bible) also a “public” task? This line cuts through “reformed” theologies all the same—whether in the context of systematics, biblical theology, or otherwise. The same goes for *who* we are doing theology *for*: (Again, the answers vary depending on which reformed authority is consulted. Theology may be for the entire world [e.g., “public” theology], or it might be just for the believing community, or perhaps for a mixture of both—such as the religious community (those who acknowledge transcendent realities and revelation, but may not confess Christ as Lord). The shape and spirit of entire denominations depend on differing answers to this question alone.

23 It goes without saying that each of subcategories below are associated in different degrees. Some denominations or documents may be closer to the description of the category than others. Some categories, like denominations, are a snapshot in time since they will likely continue to morph over the next several decades. In particularly difficult cases, I have “cross-listed” an item in more than one category and noted this in footnotes.

Confessional Reformed Theology

Descriptive Summary

The Confessional Reformed category essentially represents the “traditionalist,” “preservationist,” or “conservative” branch of reformed theology. Alternative labels might include “hard Calvinist” (by onlookers) or “deeply Reformed” (by insiders). It has significant historical roots in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Puritanism.²⁴ Combined with a modern American context, many (but not all)²⁵ expressions today can be properly described as fundamentalist,²⁶ focusing on in-out dynamics and fixed lines of doctrinal demarcation, and often exhibit propositionalist biblicism,²⁷ groupthink, assertiveness in response to alienation (i.e., from the rise of secularism and theological liberalism),²⁸ and some degree of separatism.

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- 24 See David Wells, ed., *Reformed Theology in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) in conjunction with Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation* (New York: Viking, 2003), and David Hall, *The Puritans: A Transatlantic History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).
- 25 Tim Keller (a PCA Pastor in Manhattan), for example, generally lacks the typical authoritarian ethos of this group. Sathianathan Clarke, *Competing Fundamentalisms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), along with David Gushee, *Still Christian: Following Jesus Out of Evangelicalism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), have suggested that the cleavage between evangelicalism and fundamentalism has largely dissolved since the start of the twenty-first century.
- 26 Contrary to Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press: 2000), 245, “fundamentalist” is a sociological category in its own right like “Christian,” “terrorist,” or “demagogue,” not solely a pejorative label. One of the most recent sociological definitions comes from Josie McSkimming, *Leaving Christian Fundamentalism and the Reconstruction of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 40: “Christian fundamentalism may be understood as a totalizing and highly influential social movement, thoroughly adept in the acculturation of its participant members through embracing and promoting a defensive collective identity, suspicious of ‘the other’ but also committed to mission and evangelism. It is apparent that a guarded, fortress and self-perpetuating inward focus (with requisite identity specifications) emerges.” See also George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); James Barr, “Fundamentalism,” in *The Collected Essays of James Barr*, ed. John Barton, vol. 2, part V (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Luca Ozzano, “Religious Fundamentalism,” in *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics*, ed. Jeffrey Haynes (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2016); Harriet Harris, “Fundamentalism,” in *The Routledge Companion to Modern Christian Thought*, ed. Chad Meister and James Beilby (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013); Joel Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). See also the five-volume *Fundamentalisms Project* by University of Chicago Press.
- 27 Or “bibliolatry.” For critical perspectives by other Christians, see Jamin Andreas Hübner, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism* (Rapid City: Hills Publishing Group, 2019); Craig Allert, *A High View of Scripture?: The Authority of the Bible and the Formation of the New Testament Canon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007); Carlos Bovell, *Inerrancy and the Spiritual Formation of Younger Evangelicals* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007); Carlos Bovell, *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Authority of Scripture: Historical, Biblical, and Theoretical Perspectives* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011); Carlos Bovell, *Rehabilitating Inerrancy in a Culture of Fear* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012); James Dunn, *The Living Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2012), and the popular works of Peter Enns.
- 28 Cf. Clarke, *Competing Fundamentalisms*, and Hodgson, *Winds of the Spirit*, 58-60, who says, “The resurgence of conservative and evangelical Christianity in recent years is symptomatic both of the magnitude of the experienced threat and of the deep desire to recover stable ethical and religious foundations in a topsy-turvy age. . . . The predominant representations of religion in our culture have become anachronistic and anti-intellectual; what is offered too frequently is a fundamentalist

In this framework, “theology” is virtually indistinguishable from doctrine, and doctrine is what the doctrinal standards (creeds/confessions) contain, and what the doctrinal standards contain is simply “the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.”²⁹ This doctrinal system is ultimately a web (or list) of true propositions extracted from the inerrant text of God’s Word³⁰ (either the *Textus Receptus* or a theoretical, singular autographic text).³¹ Thus, to seriously question the doctrinal standards is to (*functionally*) question the entire system and, eventually, to question God. This means that deviations from the established doctrinal (confessional) norms are generally viewed with suspicion, and the ethical systems promoted are (at least from the perspective of outsiders) notoriously strict.³² Much of this proves to be a point of tension given the idea of “always reforming” (*Semper Reformanda*). Indeed, in this category, the past tense of “reformed” comes out the most, and concerns about being “the true Reformed Christians” comes out the strongest.

The dynamics of the Christian life are generally viewed as an extension from these doctrinal foundations. With the right theology, everything else in the

embrace of traditional beliefs and values and an explicit refusal to enter into dialogue with modernity. Religion provides a convenient escape for those who lack the strength to cope with the threats of modernity.”

- 29 This phrase comes from the “Declaratory Statement” of the 1903 American revision to the Westminster Standards. It is frequently found on the websites of various Confessional Reformed organizations.
- 30 Major works supporting inerrancy from a Confessional Reformed perspective include N. B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley, eds., *The Infallible Word: A Symposium by the Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967); Vern Poythress, *Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012); Vern Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels: A God-Centered Approach to the Challenges of Harmonization* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012); E. J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1972); Kevin DeYoung, *Taking God at His Word* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016).
- 31 The most recent and engaging debate on this subject is Douglas Wilson and James R. White, *Debating the Text of the Word of God* (Simposio, 2017). The debate largely revolves around what the *WCF* (and other reformed confessions) was referring to when it talks about the text of the Bible being preserved since a very limited selection of manuscripts were available in the mid-1600s (when the Westminster Standards were written). From Wilson’s perspective, the question is how the *WCF* can be referring to a textual tradition—e.g., the early uncials and papyri—that wasn’t available to the authors of the *WCF* (and didn’t need to be). White, on the other hand, gives priority to a theoretical autographic text because the poor textual quality of the TR is well-known. But this appears to insert a contemporary concern into the intentions of the Westminster “divines” (authors), as well as of Jesus and the biblical authors, who appeared not to care about a theoretical autographic text. See Timothy Law, *When God Spoke Greek* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) in conjunction with Brennan Breed, *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History* (Indianapolis: India University Press, 2014).
- 32 There are other implications of this chain of thought—such as the idea that the biblical authors all understood and taught the same “system of doctrine.” It would obviously be anachronistic (at the very least) to suggest that Paul, Peter, James, and other NT authors would have faithfully subscribed to “the five points of Calvinism” or the *Westminster Confession of Faith* if confronted with them in the first century. Nevertheless, this remains the general belief of many Confessional Reformed.

Christian life should generally fall into place. If there is any trouble, it can be assumed that faulty doctrine is somewhere to be found—or at least an inconsistent application of it.

Contemporary Figures

Kevin DeYoung, Robert Yarbrough, Tim Challies, R. C. Sproul, R. C. Sproul Jr., John Frame, Tim Keller, Vern Poythress, J. Ligon Duncan III, Michael Horton, R. Scott Clark, Douglas Wilson³³

DOCUMENTS

- A. *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1648)—along with shorter and longer catechisms (together, with the *Book of Order*, are called the Westminster Standards). The *WCF* is thirty-three solid chapters of propositional doctrine, which was sponsored by the English parliamentary government and completed from 1646–48 by the “Westminster Divines.” As a product of its time, its language, epistemology, and instruction on ethics indicate its European seventeenth-century context; the Standards are literary and theological artifacts of “Post-Reformation Scholasticism.”³⁴ Many of these particularities in the *WCF* were excised and/or changed in the 1788 and 1903 revisions to it—changes that some accept and others reject.³⁵ Regardless, the Westminster system reached its apex in the work of Francis Turretin (1623–1687), which (still in Latin) became the default theological framework for Princeton Theological Seminary in America until the early 1900s. The *WCF* remains one of the most widely used Reformed confessions in the world (often simply referred to as “The Confession”).

33 The full spectrum of this group would probably locate Keller on the furthest “left” and Wilson on the farthest “right,” though I realize these binary polarities are sometimes unhelpful or irrelevant.

34 For a thorough study on this topic, see Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003). For a more concise and light treatment on the evolution of theology, including this period and topic, see William Placher, *A History of Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013) along with his two primary-source compendium volumes, *Readings in the History of Theology*, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015 and 2017).

35 E.g., removing the claim that the Pope is the anti-Christ, the sections that essentially wedded church and state, etc. Despite having a redaction/revision history and touting *Semper Reformanda* slogan, most Confessional Reformed are staunchly opposed to changing the Standards today. The event of the Westminster Assembly of the 1600s is generally viewed as the apex of doctrinal development, from which all Christians today are called to master, teach and re-teach, and embody. (Reformed Baptists are particularly zealous about the arrival of their confessional event in history, with “1689” appearing on apparel, digital avatars, email addresses and aliases, and even bodily tattoos.).

- B. *Second-London Baptist Confession of Faith (LBCF, 1689)*. A (second) Baptist revision of the *WCF*, with revisions to covenant theology, baptism, and other topics, but mostly unchanged.³⁶ Followers of this confession are known as “Confessional Reformed Baptists” or “Particular Baptists.”
- C. The “Three Forms of Unity” (A representation of “Continental Calvinism” because of its geographical representation; retains much of the same doctrinal content as the Westminster Standards.)
- a. *Belgic Confession* (1561, orig. French). Authored by a Dutch pastor and named after the *Belgica*, the Low Countries in present day Netherlands and Belgium.
 - b. *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563, orig. German). Commissioned by Elector Palantine Frederick III (1515–1576) in the Kingdom of Germany as a teaching tool for churches.
 - c. *Canons of the Synod of Dordt* (1618–1619, orig. Dutch). A list of canons that condemn Arminianism. This same synod added the previous two documents (above) to its approved theological documents, thus forming the “Three Forms of Unity.”
- D. *Second Helvetic Confession* (1560s). Written by Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), published by Elector Palantine Frederick III, and endorsed by churches in Hungary, Poland, France, Scotland, and Switzerland.
- E. *Helvetic Consensus* (1675). The most scholastic and strict of the reformed confessions and also the most representative of Turretin’s thought.³⁷
- F. *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (1978).³⁸ A primarily American doctrinal statement produced by both evangelical fundamentalists and Confessional Reformed pastors and theologians. It outlines a particularly strict understanding of the Bible’s truthfulness and inspiration. While dated in its orientation of textual criticism (and “the originals”) and typically not integrated into denominations, the document remains a benchmark (and requirement) for many seminaries, colleges, and organizations.

36 The First London Baptist Confession was in 1644.

37 This particular document infamously ascribed inerrancy and inspiration to the vowel-points of the Hebrew Masoretic text.

38 Cross-listed under “Calvinist Baptist” below.

DENOMINATIONS³⁹

1. Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). The second largest Presbyterian body in the U.S. Candidates for ordination must substantially adhere to the Westminster Standards but may have minor exceptions approved by the Presbytery.
2. Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC). Perhaps the most conservative of Confessional Reformed denominations.
3. Reformed Church in the United States (RCUS). A descendant of the German Reformed Church and also a dissenting body of the 1934 United Church of Christ (UCC) initiative.
4. Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC). Allows local congregations to ordain women and tends to be more charismatic than PCA and OPC.
5. Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARPC)
6. United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA)
7. Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches (CREC). Supported and influenced by Douglas Wilson, and James Jordan, and one of the few Reformed denominations that affirm paedocommunion and “Federal Vision” theology.⁴⁰
8. Association of Reformed Baptist Churches in America (ARBCA). A pseudo-denomination of 1689 *LBCF*-subscribing churches.⁴¹

SCHOOLS

1. Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia, PA), or “Westminster East.” Started by Princeton professors (John Machen, Cornelius Van Til) after Princeton “went liberal” and sees itself as having “preserved the heritage of old Princeton and passed it on to WSC.”⁴²

39 See also Korean American Presbyterian Church (KAPC); Free Reformed Churches of North America (FRCNA); Heritage Reformed Churches (HRC); American Presbyterian Church (APC); Bible Presbyterian Church (BPC); Netherlands Reformed Congregations (NRC); Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA); Covenant Presbyterian Church (CPC); Covenant Reformed Presbyterian Church (CRPC); Sovereign Grace Fellowship of Canada.

40 Federal Vision theology largely centers around the nature of God’s covenant with chosen people and how it comes into being in the ordinances/sacraments of baptism and Lord’s Table. Even though it is already an extreme minority view, Wilson found it necessary to publicly distance himself from it. His essay “Federal Vision No Mas” (dougwils.com, January 17, 2017) reads, “I have finally become convinced that the phrase *federal vision* is a hurdle that I cannot get over, under or around. . . . I have come to believe that my robust defense up and down the line *contributed* to the group-think that was going on.”

41 ARBCA recently split over “divine impassibility” and the pastoral-coverup of pastor Tom Chantry’s known charges of sexual abuse. (He was sentenced to twenty-four years in prison in summer of 2019). In October 2019, the Association held a vote to dissolve, which failed, and continues to lose more of its forty or so member churches.

42 “History,” *Westminster Seminary California*, <https://www.wscal.edu/about-wsc/history>

According to its website, “Machen left the prestige of Princeton to stand for the truth of the Bible. He knew that theological compromise would harm the spiritual power of the church.”⁴³

2. Westminster Theological Seminary (Escondido, CA), or “Westminster West.” Was a branch of Westminster Seminary East until becoming independent in 1979. It maintains partnership with Institute of Reformed Baptist Studies and remains one of the last seminaries in the United States that prohibits women from earning MDiv degrees.⁴⁴
3. Reformed Theological Seminary (Jackson, MS; Charlotte, NC; Washington DC; Orlando, FL; Atlanta, GA; Memphis, TN; Dallas, TX; Houston, TX; New York City, NY). Founded in 1966 by conservatives from the Southern Presbyterian Church.
4. Covenant Theological Seminary (PCA)
5. Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary
6. Covenant Baptist Theological Seminary. The main (only?) Confessional Reformed Baptist Seminary.
7. New Saint Andrews College (led by CREC Board members). Co-founded by Douglas Wilson and home to “Federal Vision,” paedocommunion, and a constellation of other esoteric beliefs. Shares ties with the Theopolis Institute (James Jordan and Peter Leithart, who was NSA faculty).⁴⁵

ORGANIZATIONS

1. Evangelical Theological Society (ETS).⁴⁶ Not explicitly “Reformed” but exhibits a very strong presence of Confessional Reformed and Calvinist Baptist members, and also exhibits a fundamentalist orientation.⁴⁷

43 “Our History,” *Westminster Theological Seminary*, <https://www.wts.edu/history/>

44 Most other seminaries that prohibit women pastors simply prohibit women’s ordination, not their earning of degrees.

45 See also Whitefield Theological Seminary; Knox Theological Seminary; Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary; Erskine Theological Seminary (ARPC); New Geneva Theological Seminary; Covenant Baptist Theological Seminary; Universitas Pelita Harapan (Indonesia); Covenant College (PCA); Erskine College (ARPC); Providence Christian College; Geneva College; Whitefield College.

46 Cross-listed under “Baptist Calvinist” below.

47 I.e., the original doctrinal statement of ETS was a sentence on the inerrancy of Scripture. However, after it became apparent that Mormons and other groups could be members, they added a statement on the Trinity (oddly, with an indefinite article). The doctrinal infighting was so toxic that it “split” twice, first in 1970–73 (introducing the Institute for Biblical Research, IBR), and again in 1990 (introducing the Canadian Evangelical Theological Association, CETA). Because (a) ETS’s environment remains troublesome, (b) IBR is narrowly focused on biblical studies, and (c) post-conservative and post-liberal Christianity is growing exponentially, CETA recently became the Canadian-American Theological Society (CATA); it remains the only Christian, theological and ecumenical academic organization in North America.

2. Founders Ministries. Formerly “the Southern Baptist Founders Conference,” a Confessional Reformed and Confessional Baptist group within the SBC led by Tom Ascol.⁴⁸
3. World Reformed Fellowship. Founded by the PCA and focuses on uniting explicitly inerrantist and Confessional Reformed Christians.
4. The Gospel Coalition.⁴⁹ Started by D. A. Carson and Tim Keller (PCA) and boasts one of the highest-traffic evangelical blogs on the internet. The website says, “We are a fellowship of evangelical churches in the Reformed tradition deeply committed to renewing our faith in the gospel of Christ and to reforming our ministry practices to conform fully to the Scriptures.”⁵⁰
5. Institute for Reformed Baptist Studies. A course-credit program at Westminster Seminary West under James Renihan.
6. Presbyterian Reformed Ministries International
7. Ligonier Ministries (created by the late R. C. Sproul)
8. Theopolis Institute. Founded by Peter Leithart and James Jordan (both CREC), a small institute seeking to promote its highly idiosyncratic version of reformed theology in society.
9. Sovereign Nations.⁵¹ A nationalist and politically conservative activist organization founded by Confessional Reformed Baptist Michael O’Fallon.
10. Ezra Institute for Contemporary Christianity. A conservative Neocalvinist organization in Toronto sympathetic to theonomy and the thought of Evan Runner.⁵²

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48 The organization recently split over the *By What Standard?* video documentary; several board members stepped down after the public release of the trailer.

49 Cross-listed with “Baptist Calvinist” below.

50 “Foundation Documents,” *The Gospel Coalition* (accessed December 12, 2017), <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/about/foundation-documents>. TGC started in 2005.

51 Cross-listed with “Baptist Calvinist” below.

52 One might think of it as the fundamentalist, non-degree offering version of the Institute for Christian Studies.

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Calvinist Baptist Reformed Theology

Summary Description

Calvinist Baptists are like the Confessional Reformed in many ways except for a handful of differences. First, infant baptism is rejected, and believer's baptism is upheld. Second, Reformed confessions, catechisms, and similar documents tend not to have the same elevated status.⁵³ Third, the theology and overall ethos differs at various sub-points (see below).

The first subpoint surrounds the topic of biblical theology (or “canonical-theology,” “whole-Bible theology,” “redemptive-historical theology”). Calvinist Baptists exhibit a number of different frameworks such as dispensationalism, progressive dispensationalism, new covenant theology, and progressive covenantalism.⁵⁴ This diversity is largely due to less “confessionalism,” since most of the Reformed confessions—originating from the same 150-year period—give little wiggle-room on this topic. Calvinist Baptists center their thought on certain aspects of Reformed theology, such as the Five Points of Calvinism,⁵⁵ the “Five

53 Cf. Oliver Crisp, *Saving Calvinism: Expanding the Reformed Tradition* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2016), 18: “Many of those today who rally around the five points of Calvinism are themselves guilty of cherry-picking what they want to hold as Christians who are Reformed. Arguably, Reformed theology includes a particular account of theological authority that includes a role for creeds and confessions—something often sidelined in contemporary popular accounts of Reformed thinking.”

54 See Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 2007); Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000); Fred Zaspel and Tom Wells, *New Covenant Theology* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2002); and Stephen Wellum and Brent Parker, eds., *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenantal Theologies* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2016), respectively.

55 Typically summarized as Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement (or “Particular Redemption”), Irresistible Grace, Perseverance of the Saints (sometimes equivocated or substituted with “Eternal Security”). Hence the acronym, “TULIP.” Although the basic substance of this conglomeration of ideas can be found in the Canons of Dort (1619), according to Kenneth Stewart, *Ten Myths About Calvinism: Recovering the Breadth of the Reformed Tradition* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), the earliest known use of the TULIP acronym is from a 1913 newspaper article.

Solas of the Reformation,”⁵⁶ or the all-encompassing sovereignty and providence of God.⁵⁷

A second subpoint that divides Confessional Reformed and Calvinist Baptists is the divergence in denominational and institutional representation. Calvinist Baptists are represented only in a handful of denominational (and quasi-denominational) organizations and colleges/seminaries, with their main presence among independent Baptist churches and a few popular para-church ministries.

Finally, Calvinist Baptists seem to have a louder voice in public “culture wars” and tend to be more popular. In terms of the number of radio listeners and podcast downloads, John Piper, Albert Mohler, and John MacArthur will (at least in my estimation) surpass virtually any of the Confessional Reformed figures by a substantial margin.

All of these distinctives have forged a different set of denominations, schools, institutional loyalties, publishing houses,⁵⁸ and theological treatises. It is important to note that the largest Protestant denomination in the U.S., the Southern Baptist Convention, has been split over Calvinism for many decades. This embittered factionalism was publicly incarnated in the competing careers of Paige Patterson (the strongly anti-Calvinist President of Southwestern Theological Seminary) and Albert Mohler (the strongly pro-Calvinist President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary).⁵⁹ As I will note below, this divide is partly due to the Baptists’ own confessionalism and not necessarily due to raw popularity and political maneuvers.

CONTEMPORARY FIGURES

John Piper, Wayne Grudem, John MacArthur, Albert Mohler, D. A. Carson, Mark Driscoll, Matt Chandler, Mark Dever, Alistair Begg, Daniel Akin, Chuck Swindoll, Daniel Wallace, Sam Storms, Denny Burk

DOCUMENTS

1. *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (1978).⁶⁰ For Calvinist

⁵⁶ *Sola Scriptura, Sola Christus, Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Sola Deo Gloria.*

⁵⁷ This is one reason why the category is labeled “Calvinist Baptist” and not “Reformed Baptist.” The second reason is because “Reformed Baptist” (or “Particular Baptist”) typically refers to Baptists who adhere to the *Second London Baptist Confession* (listed above), which is a narrow subset to which I’m not here referring.

⁵⁸ For example, Crossway remains the go-to publisher for Calvinist Baptists, Baker (and Baker Academic) for broader Protestant-Reformed authors, and Presbyterian and Reformed for the Confessional Reformed—though there is lots of cross-fertilization.

⁵⁹ Patterson was forced to step down in summer of 2018 due to allegations of misconduct. See Kate Shellnut, “Paige Patterson Fired by Southwestern, Stripped of Retirement Benefits,” *Christianity Today* (May 30, 2018). He was recently found guilty of covering up the rapes of a promising, charismatic SBC preacher and suppressing the voices of those he impregnated. See Robert Downen, “Women are Hurting,” *Houston Chronicle* (August 22, 2019).

⁶⁰ Cross-listed above under “Confessional Reformed.”

Baptists, it tends to function as a litmus test not just for Protestant, Reformed, or evangelical theology, but for Christian orthodoxy in general.

2. *The Abstract Principles of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary* (1858). The confession/doctrinal statement of the flagship SBC seminary. It is Calvinist in orientation, including a section on “divine election,” the fall of man (where the sinner is “wholly opposed to God and His law”), regeneration (which “is a work of God’s free and special grace alone”), and “Perseverance of the Saints” (generally worded after the *WCF*).
3. *The Baptist Faith and Message* (1925, 1963, 2000). The official doctrinal statement of the Southern Baptist Convention (and affiliates). It is a hybrid of the *New Hampshire Confession* (1833) and *Abstract Principles*.⁶¹ The 1963 revision added new sections, including one on the “Family” that defines the permanent roles of husbands (leadership) and wives (subordination to leadership).⁶² The 2000 revision introduced even more content, such as sections on “Education,” “Missions and Evangelism,” “Social Services,” “Cooperation,” and “Stewardship.” The section on “Church” added “the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture” (ruling out women pastors).⁶³ The *BF&M* is listed here under “Calvinist Baptists” because its Calvinist orientation is debated (see below), and, because of the size of the SBC, may exert considerable influence amongst “reformed” communities.
4. *Truth, Trust, and Testimony in a Time of Tension* (2013). “A Statement from the Calvinism Advisory Committee” of the SBC that urges “Southern Baptists to grant one another liberty in those areas within *BF&M* where differences in interpretation cause us to disagree.” In a series of affirmations and denials, the document affirmed

61 Some (but not all) of the Calvinist overtones have been softened. Discarding the *Abstract Principle*’s section on “Election,” *BF&M* uses the *New Hampshire Confession*’s section “God’s Purpose of Grace”; the “Fall of Man” has been revised; regeneration as “a work of God’s free and special grace alone” is modified to be “a work of God’s free grace conditioned upon faith in Christ”; the “Perseverance of the Saints” is condensed and simplified under “Perseverance.”

62 “He has the God-given responsibility to provide for, to protect, and to lead his family. A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ. She, being in the image of God as is her husband and thus equal to him, has the God-given responsibility to respect her husband and to serve as his helper in managing the household and nurturing the next generation.”

63 This is despite the fact that “Three quarters (73.1%) of female Southern Baptists favor women in the pulpit, compared to just 58.1% of Southern Baptist men.” See Ryan Burge, “Why Southern Baptists are unlikely to get female pastors,” *Religion News Service* (June 11, 2019).

that Southern Baptists can be either Arminian or Calvinist but rejects “hyper-Calvinism” and extreme variants of Arminianism.⁶⁴

5. *The Cambridge Declaration* (1996). Produced by the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, an exposition of the Five Solas that explicitly ties “evangelical” identity to the theology of “the reformation.”⁶⁵
6. *The Danvers Statement* (1987). Authored and endorsed by a number of prominent Calvinist Baptists. Produced by the Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW), the document is the larger predecessor to the *BF&M* short section on the Family. It outlines a model of manhood and womanhood (dubbed “complementarianism”) and prohibits women pastors. Although not immediately a statement on “Reformed” doctrine, the Danvers Statement has been adopted by various Reformed institutions, institutions, and organizations and functions as a benchmark for Christian orthodoxy regarding gender, marriage, and women-in-ministry topics.⁶⁶
7. *The Nashville Statement* (2017). Also authored by CBMW; a statement on gender, especially as it relates to homosexuality, transgender persons, and self-identity. It has been added to the list of required doctrinal statements for faculty at SBTS and was upheld by the PCA in 2019 but has not yet gained significant recognition.
8. *T4G Affirmations and Denials* (2006). A doctrinal statement put together by the inaugural “Together for the Gospel” conference. Essentially a condensed version of TGC’s “Founding Documents” (2005).

DENOMINATIONS

1. The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). As noted above, the SBC’s Calvinist identity is disputed. Regardless, the Calvinist strand within the denomination has a very strong presence and influence.

64 Despite ambiguity regarding interpretation of the *Baptist Faith and Message* and direct ties to Calvinist ideas, the document says “We . . . deny that The Baptist Faith and Message is insufficient as the doctrinal basis for our cooperation. Other Baptist Confessions are not to be lenses through which The Baptist Faith and Message is to be read. The Baptist Faith and Message alone is our expression of common belief.” Calvinism Advisory Committee of the SBC, “Trust, Truth, and Tension,” *SBCLife* (June 2013). In this sense, strict Southern Baptists are, indeed, quite “confessional.”

65 The statement says: “Evangelicals also shared a common heritage in the ‘solas’ of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. Today the light of the Reformation has been significantly dimmed. The consequence is that the word ‘evangelical’ has become so inclusive as to have lost its meaning.”

66 Indeed, it is difficult to find a Confessional Reformed or Calvinist Baptist person or group that substantially disagrees with the *Danvers Statement*.

2. Sovereign Grace Churches. An association of Baptist, Calvinist churches with a charismatic (“continuationist”) orientation.
3. Acts 29 Network. A church-planting network with an explicitly complementarian and Calvinist bent. Co-founded by Mark Driscoll and also influenced by Matt Chandler.
4. Continental Baptist Churches. A small association of Baptist Calvinist churches with a New Covenant orientation.

SCHOOLS

1. Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Although not explicitly Reformed, many or most faculty of this well-known evangelical seminary are Calvinist Baptists.
2. The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBC). One of the largest seminaries in the world.⁶⁷ As noted above, its original doctrinal statement is Calvinist in orientation.
3. The Master’s College and Seminary. Founded and led by radio expositor John MacArthur; dispensational, Baptist, Calvinist.
4. Toronto Baptist Seminary and Bible College
5. Bethlehem College and Seminary. Based out of Bethlehem Baptist Church in St. Paul, MN (where John Piper was pastor).
6. Boyce College (SBC). The undergraduate arm of SBTS.

ORGANIZATIONS

1. Evangelical Theological Society (ETS)⁶⁸
2. The Gospel Coalition (TGC)⁶⁹
3. The Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. Like others, not explicitly Calvinist or “Reformed” but tends to share such theological orientations.
4. Grace to You Ministries (John MacArthur)
5. Shepherds Conference. A large, annual event of primarily Calvinist Baptists produced by Grace Community Church (where John MacArthur served as Pastor).
6. Together for the Gospel (“T4G”). A conference of primarily TGC members.
7. Desiring God Ministries (John Piper)

67 As of 2019, the three largest seminaries in the U.S. (and likely North America) are all Southern Baptist. See Chelsen Vicari, “What are America’s largest seminaries in 2019?” *Christian Post* (October 1, 2019).

68 Cross-listed above under “Confessional-Reformed.”

69 Cross-listed above under “Confessional Reformed.”

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Neocalvinist Reformed Theology*Summary Description*

Neocalvinist reformed theology (or “Neocalvinism”) enters the scene with the rise of modernity and work of several thinkers, pastors, and theologians from the 1800s, most notably Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) and Herman Bavinck (1854–1921).⁷⁰ Generally speaking, Neocalvinism is (a) Dutch Reformed theology tempered by modernism, and (b) the more direct theological and intellectual descendant of John Calvin, having sidestepped both the entrenched scholasticism of Turretin and the fundamentalism of American evangelicalism. Given this orientation and the particular intellectual influences of the sixteenth and seventeenth century before Neocalvinism, Confessional Reformed theology and Baptist Calvinism may be considered deviations from the “theology of the reformers” (see the fifth category below) while Neocalvinism is an *revised extension* of the “theology of the reformers.” All, of course, still remain “reformed theology,” but the ideological paths through history are different and therefore give rise to different trajectories.

One scholar summarizes the distinctives of Neocalvinism in four points:

1. Neocalvinism insists on a comprehensive and integrated understanding of creation, fall and redemption.
2. Neocalvinism emphasizes God’s good and dynamic order for creation.

⁷⁰ Following in their footsteps are a number of notable philosophers such as Herman Dooyeweerd (1894–1977), Evan Runner (1916–2002), and Roy Clouser. Note also that Neocalvinism is also regularly called “Kuyperianism,” though some would distinguish the latter as a subset of the former.

3. Neocalvinism affirms the historical development or differentiation of creation.
4. Neocalvinism recognizes an ultimate religious conflict: the antithesis, in all of life.⁷¹

With the Confessional Reformed, Neocalvinists affirm the Westminster Standards and/or the Three Forms of Unity, but loosely. Instead of functioning as the explicit, active, internal grammar and focus of theological work, they are viewed as historical starting points instead of permanent points of arrival. While the eschatological emphasis in Confessional Reformed theology points towards converting more people to reformed confessionalism, Neocalvinism focuses more directly on the creative development of God's kingdom and the restoration of all of creation under Christ's Lordship. What exactly this "Lordship" embodiment should look like is internally debated. But modern dualisms like the sacred/secular, natural/supernatural, and others are regularly questioned. The result tends to be a grounded but noticeably open and "big-picture" ethos, with noticeable flickers of the *semper reformanda* spirit.

To quickly draw all of these distinctions in contrast to other views, Neocalvinists frequently use the label "reformational theology" instead of "reformed theology."

CONTEMPORARY FIGURES

David Bosch, Brian Walsh, Sylvia Keesmaat, Craig Bartholomew, James K. A. Smith, James Skillen, Roy Clouser, J. Richard Middleton,⁷² Alvin Plantinga, Richard Plantinga, Richard Mouw, Nicholas Wolterstorff

DOCUMENTS

1. Westminster Standards⁷³
2. Three Forms of Unity⁷⁴
3. *Belhar Confession* (1982). A response to the Dutch Reformed church's participation in South African apartheid. The Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DMRC) adopted the Belhar Confession as its "Fourth Form of Unity" in 1986, followed by acceptance in the Reformed Church of America (RCA) in 2010 and Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in 2012.⁷⁵ The short statement (originally in

71 Craig Bartholomew, "Relevance of Neocalvinism for Today," *The Kuyperian* (2004), accessed 11/28/2017, <http://kuyperian.blogspot.com/2004/09/relevance-of-neocalvinism-for-today.html>.

72 Middleton identifies as a "Wesleyan Neocalvinist."

73 Cross-listed under "Confessional-Reformed" above.

74 Cross-listed under "Confessional-Reformed" above.

75 The CRC, however, did not adopt the Belhar as one of its "confessions" but as part of a new category called "ecumenical faith declaration." For some this was a good compromise, while others

Afrikaans) focuses on themes of unity, justice, reconciliation, diversity, and freedom.

4. *The Accra Confession* (2004). Produced by the World Council of Reformed Churches; “states that matters of economic and ecological justice are not only social, political and moral issues, they are integral to faith in Jesus Christ and affect the integrity of the church.” Mainly critical of “economic neoliberal globalism”—the negative effects of globalized economies on society and environment, but is cautious not to endorse command economies as an answer.
5. Associated schools and denominations have written a host of theological, social, and ethical statements on topics of contemporary interest.⁷⁶

DENOMINATIONS

1. Christian Reformed Church (CRC)
2. Reformed Church in America (RCA)

SCHOOLS⁷⁷

1. Calvin Seminary (CRC)
2. Western Theological Seminary (RCA) (Michigan)
3. Calvin University (CRC)
4. Dordt University (CRC)
5. Northwestern College (RCA) (Iowa)
6. Kuyper College
7. Trinity Western University (British Columbia)
8. Trinity Christian College (Illinois)
9. Redeemer University College (Ontario)
10. The Free University (Amsterdam)
11. Institute for Christian Studies (Ontario)
12. Hope College (RCA)⁷⁸
13. The Kings College (Alberta)

saw it as embodying a (ironic) “separate but equal” status. It was a bitter debate for some in the CRC.

76 E.g., Kuyper College’s “Statement on Racism,” Hope College’s “Position Statement on Homosexuality,” the RCA’s General Synod statements on “Christian Zionism,” “Immigration,” “Gun Control,” “Gambling,” “Abortion,” etc.

77 Note that some of these institutions have no formal association with or oversight from the CRC or RCA but have a strong connection to these denominations and were founded by Neocalvinists.

78 Cross-listed under “Progressive-Reformed” below.

ORGANIZATIONS

1. Cardus
2. The Center for Public Justice
3. Christian Labor Association of Canada (CLAC)
4. The Coalition for Christian Outreach (CCO)
5. Association of Reformed Colleges and Universities (ARCU)

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79 Crisp identifies as a “Reformed Catholic,” whose views are idiosyncratic. It appears here because I didn’t want to exclude his book from these bibliographies, and it seemed to fit best under Neocalvinism. He also authored *Saving Calvinism: Expanding the Reformed Tradition* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016) and *Retrieving Doctrine: Essays in Reformed Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011).

80 Hoeksema isn’t entirely representative given his rejection of Kuyper’s popular teaching on “common grace,” along with other eccentricities.

Smith, James K. A., and James Olthuis, eds. *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition: Creation, Covenant, and Participation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.

Spykman, Gordon. *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992.

Wolters, Albert. *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational World-view*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005.

Progressive Reformed

Summary Description

The Progressive Reformed is in many ways the “liberal” opposite of the Confessional Reformed. It tends to be more “forward-looking” than “backward-looking.” Instead of recreating an expression of Christian thought, worship, and life after a golden era of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century reformed thought, adaptation and change is viewed as essential to survive and stay effective. Far from gearing up for war like the fundamentalists, the Progressive Reformed respond to Modernism with olive branches instead of bombs. A spirit of liberty, openness, sensitivity, and inclusiveness predominates the overall ethos.

The classic Reformed Confessions play a very small (if any) role in the local church and seminary. But it would be unfair to say that such documents play no role at all.⁸¹ In fact, in the spirit of the Reformation, everything should be regularly re-evaluated; the church ought to “sing to the Lord a new song.” This means new confessions, new perspectives, new theologies, and new embodiments of the gospel.⁸² For “it is a mistake to limit ‘the Reformed tradition’ to a set of beliefs from the past.”⁸³ More than all other branches of reformed thought, progressives seek to hear the Spirit of God in those outside a particular denomination and, indeed, outside the Christian faith itself. Ideas and activities hardly considered possible in other frameworks (e.g., interfaith dialogues, QUILTBAG⁸⁴ pastors and marriage, etc.) are not uncommon.

Nevertheless, like any group, there are highly divergent undercurrents pulling in multiple directions, and institutional (e.g., school or denomination) perspectives do not necessarily represent all of the local members and cannot necessarily be reconciled. It would also be a mistake, for example, to suggest that something

81 In particular, see the first section of David Jensen, ed., *Always Being Reformed: Challenges and Prospects for the Future of Reformed Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016).

82 “Both place and date indicate a central feature of the Reformed tradition: church is called to confess its faith anew in each time and place.” PCUSA, “Introduction,” in *The 1967 Confession: Inclusive Language Edition* (Louisville: Congregational Ministries, 2002), 1.

83 William Stacy Johnson, *John Calvin: Reformer of the 21st Century* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 2.

84 Queer/Questioning, Unlabeled/Undecided, Intersex, Lesbian, Transgender, Bisexual, Androgynous, Gay/Genderqueer.

like Christian apologetics is nonexistent. In fact, many Progressive Reformed would argue that the only sustainable, intellectually credible, and truly Christian manifestation of gospel witness is one that is not afraid of the secular academy nor conditioned by the pre-determined answers of the past. Here, both the post-liberal and post-modern traditions of the twentieth and twenty-first century synthesize with Christian theology for a unique flavor.

In short, there are “conservative” and “progressive” ends of the Progressive Reformed spectrum. Some would adhere strictly to such things as the Nicene Creed (and, occasionally, even the Westminster Standards) and uphold propositional models of doctrine. Others on the far left might be easily identified as unitarian and universalist and see most forms of “evangelism” as outmoded. Many or most progressives would not fit either of these (contradictory) extremes, being closer to NeoOrthodox/Barthian, Revisionist/Constructionist, and post-liberal orientations.⁸⁵ As a whole, they do not feel threatened by changing culture as the Confessional Reformed and Baptist Calvinists often do. Many would self-identify as “reformed” while others would not.

Finally, the Progressive-Reformed is mostly represented by major mainline denominations such as the Presbyterian Church (USA), United Church of Christ (UCC), and Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC).

CONTEMPORARY FIGURES

Katie Geneva Cannon, Brian Blount, William Placher, Daniel Migliore, Dale Allison Jr., James Charlesworth, Bruce McCormack, Rob Bell, John Douglas Hall, Amy Plantinga Pauw, William Stacy Johnson, Shirley Guthrie, Peter Hodgson

DOCUMENTS

1. *Auburn Affirmation* (1924). The most controversial document in the history of modern Reformed theology. According to the Confessional Reformed, the Presbyterian Church’s affirmation of the Auburn Affirmation is iconic of the denomination’s (and Princeton’s) turn to liberalism (hence “old Princeton,” which refers to pre-1924). According to others (including the Progressive Reformed), the document is iconic of certain reformed churches’ turn to American fundamentalism. Regardless of these differing perspectives, it can be said less controversially that the document challenged the right of the General Assembly (what is now the PCUSA) to impose the “Five Fundamentals” as a test of orthodoxy without the vote of the presbyteries

85 See the first section of David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996 [1975]).

(regional church bodies).⁸⁶ This is because from 1910–1923, the General Assembly required candidates for ordination to affirm the Five Fundamentals. In response, the *Auburn Affirmation* chiefly (a) re-affirmed the Westminster Standards as the system of doctrine taught in the Bible, (b) reminded readers that the General Assembly was not infallible and should not act as if it were, (c) said “There is no assertion in the Scriptures that their writers were kept ‘from error’ The doctrine of inerrancy, intended to enhance the authority of the Scriptures, in fact impairs their supreme authority for faith and life, and weakens the testimony of the church to the power of God unto salvation through Jesus Christ,” and (d) explicitly affirmed the inspiration of the Bible, deity and incarnation of Christ, and substitutionary atonement while noting that “we are united in believing that these are not the only theories allowed by the Scriptures and our standards as explanations of these facts and doctrines of our religion.” The document then ended with a call to liberty within limits and “the preservation of the unity and freedom of our church.” The immediate fall-out was the leaving of Princeton faculty, John Machen and Cornelius Van Til, who then founded Westminster Theological Seminary. In the wake of these events, the conservative OPC (1936) denomination was formed.

2. *The Book of Confessions*. The collection of documents representing the PCUSA’s theological orientation. It includes the Nicene Creed, Apostles’ Creed, Scots Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, Second Helvetic Confession, Westminster Standards (Confession with Shorter and Larger Catechisms), Declaration of Barmen, Confession of 1967, Belhar Confession (cross-listed above under “Neocalvinist”), and A Brief Statement of Faith (1983). The most recent documents in this collection are far more representative of the actual beliefs and ethos of the Progressive Reformed than the earlier sixteenth- and seventeenth-century confessions.
3. *The 1967 Confession* (1967; adopted into the *Book of Confessions* in 2002). A three-part confession oriented around God’s reconciling work in the world. In contrast to the 1907 revision to the *WCF*, section 9.05 specifically says the 1967 Confession is “not a system of doctrine.” It revisits the whole gamut of theological encyclopedia

⁸⁶ The five fundamentals are the inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth and deity of Jesus, substitutionary atonement, bodily resurrection of Jesus, and authenticity of Jesus’s miracles in the New Testament. Most of these were upheld by Princeton’s faculty, such as B. B. Warfield, Charles Hodge, John Machen, and Cornelius Van Til.

and summarizes them in new ways and language. It also addresses topics mostly absent from the other Reformed confessions, such as the story of Israel (9.18–19; 9.41), the purpose and relationship to other world religions (9.41–42), and the problem of “anarchy in sexual relationships” (9.47).

4. *Brief Statement of Faith* (1983). Essentially a condensed and liturgical-friendly version of the *1967 Confession*, also included in the *Book of Confessions*. It is unlike virtually all other Reformed documents in that it is (a) explicitly ecumenical (with no reference to a denomination), (b) liturgically and poetically crafted, and (c) the result of a church *rejoining*, not splitting (the consolidation between the Presbyterian Church in the USA [PCUS] and the United Presbyterian Church in America [UPCUSA]). Organized trinitarianly, the *Brief Statement* is one of the very few potential modern-day equivalents to a Nicene Creed (though obviously without a major consensus).
5. *Confessing the Faith Today: The Nature and Function of Subordinate Standards* (2003). “A study document for the Presbyterian Church in Canada.” One of the most thoughtful documents on the nature and role of confessionalism in the church, with particular relation to the reformed confessions.

DENOMINATIONS

1. Presbyterian Church of the United States of America (PCUSA). The largest Presbyterian body in the U.S.
2. Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC)
3. United Church of Christ (UCC). Rooted primarily in the German Reformed church.

SCHOOLS⁸⁷

1. Union Presbyterian Seminary (PCUSA)
2. Princeton Theological Seminary (PCUSA)
3. Princeton University (PCUSA)
4. Trinity University (PCUSA) (Texas)
5. Buena Vista University (PCUSA)
6. St. Andrews University (PCUSA)
7. University of Dubuque (PCUSA)

⁸⁷ See also Hanover College (PCUSA); Belhaven College (PCUSA); Sterling College (PCUSA) (Kansas); Andover Newton Theological School (UCC); Chicago Theological Seminary (UCC); Pacific University (UCC); Pacific School of Religion (UCC/UMC partnerships); Rocky Mountain College (UCC/PCUSA/UMC partnerships).

8. Grove City College (PCUSA)
9. Westminster College (PCUSA)
10. Hope College (RCA) (Michigan)⁸⁸
11. Fuller Theological Seminary (PCUSA/UMC partnerships). One of the largest seminaries in the world (fourth largest in U.S. in 2019); still maintains biblical “infallibility” and condemns non-heterosexual marriage.

ORGANIZATIONS

1. World Communion of Reformed Churches. An organization comprised of over 200 reformed denominations from around the world. Has produced many documents in response to contemporary issues.

THEOLOGICAL WORKS

- Burrows, Millar. *An Outline of Biblical Theology*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946.
- Guthrie, Shirley. *Always Being Reformed: Faith for a Fragmented World*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016.
- . *Christian Doctrine*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2018 (orig. 1968).
- Hall, Douglas John. *Confessing the Faith*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996.
- . *Professing the Faith*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993.
- . *Thinking the Faith*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989.
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- McCormack, Bruce, and Kelly Kapic, eds. *Mapping Modern Theology: A Thematic And Historical Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012.
- Migliore, Daniel. *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014.
- . *The Power of God and the Gods of Power*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008.
- Placher, William. *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking About God Went Wrong*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996.
- , ed. *The Essentials of Christian Theology*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003.

⁸⁸ Cross-listed under “Neocalvinist” above.

Schleiermacher, Friedrich. *The Christian Faith*. Translated by Terrence Tice, Katherine Kelsey, and Edwina Lawler. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016 (orig. 1830).

The Theology of the Reformers

Summary Description

The “theology of the reformers” is primarily oriented around the theological contributions of Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–1564), with secondary focus on Ulrich Zwingli, Peter Martyr Vermigli, Philip Melancthon, and the “pre-reformers” of John Hus and John Wyclif.

Major intellectual currents obviously contrast with Roman Catholic dogmas, practices, and institutions. However, both Catholic and reforming parties drank heavily from the same theological wells of Augustine and Thomistic/Medieval scholasticism.⁸⁹ Luther’s concerns largely revolved around the oppressive system of Rome—its machine of relics, penance, indulgences, purgatory, and other practices that degraded the spiritual and intellectual lives of church members. His new translation of the Bible into German, teaching on the “priesthood of all believers,” and public suspicion about the Pope’s infallibility made him an enemy of the state-church. His own personal struggle and insecurities about God’s judgment and righteousness led to a transformative application of Paul’s letters. Sympathizing with Paul’s struggle against the “Judaizers,” Luther saw Paul’s teaching on righteousness and “justification” as a radical, God-centered alternative to the entrapping legalisms of Rome.⁹⁰

John Calvin, another lawyer, churchman, and “convert” out of Catholicism, brought together a generation of reformed thought into a cohesive whole in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Like Luther, his work as a pastor and preacher informed much of his theology—as did his legal background. All editions of the *Institutes* reflect deeply on matters of piety, prayer, and church life (especially the sacraments) but even more on “classic” Calvinist topics like justification, knowledge of God, the law of God, faith, repentance, predestination and God’s sovereignty, along with a slew of sharp arrows aimed at Rome. Some of the “rough” edges of Luther’s thought re-emerge as smooth through the Paris-trained, humanist mind of Calvin.

With other reformers, major themes that emerge from the work of Luther and Calvin are (1) the sufficiency of Scripture in contrast to the (problematic)

89 For example, theology proper is dominated by political metaphors of kingly sovereignty; Augustinian views of righteousness and original sin, along with substance dualism, drive theological anthropology; the relationship between state and church—along with violence against heretics—is viewed as good and proper, etc.

90 The restoration to a pre-Luther, Second Temple reading of Paul and others on justification is (oddly) now known as “the New Perspective.”

pronouncements and traditions of Rome, (2) the adequacy and immediacy of God's grace and forgiveness in personal salvation, and (3) a deep suspicion about the state-church's monopoly on doctrine and on the "means of grace." As a whole, the reformation spirit is a paradoxical one characterized by both liberty (addressed extensively by both Calvin and Luther) and law-keeping (even to the point of physically punishing "heretics").⁹¹

A committed spiritual life deeply integrated with (select) biblical themes and theological doctrines remain prominent in the reformers' theology. But the Enlightenment project and scientific revolution noticeably split the 1400–1600s reformation movements down the center. Calvin and Luther were geocentrists, faced punishment for owning Bibles in their own language, and addressed their fragmenting European context; later reformed theologians saw the sun a bit differently, had personal copies of their own Bibles without worry, and found themselves one with the territorial boundaries (which were also *doctrinal* boundaries) of newly converted countries and monarchical administrations. The "theology of the reformers" has some sense of stability but still represents a transitory and experimental movement.

Doctrine of Scripture as a Case Study

With these reformed theologies briefly described, we now turn to a case study observing how they interact with a specific topic and concretely theologize. For this article, we will examine a subject that is important for all reformed theologies: the doctrine of Scripture (or "bibliology").

To systematize and streamline this analysis, priority will be given to the following representative works:

1. Confessional Reformed: Reymond's *A New Systematic Theology*, Sproul's *Everyone's a Theologian*, and Frame's *Theology of Lordship* series
2. Calvinist Baptist: Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, Akin's *A Theology for the Church*, and MacArthur and Mayhue's *Biblical Doctrine*
3. Neocalvinist: Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*, Kuyper's *Principles of Sacred Theology*, and Plantinga et al.'s *Christian Theology*
4. Progressive Reformed: Shirley's *Christian Doctrine*, Hall's *Christian*

91 Classic examples include the burning of Michael Servatus (on top of his own theology books) and the (intentionally ironic) drowning of Anabaptists. Perhaps this is the unsurprising result when *legal* scholars secede from a *legalistic* institution to create their own societies. In any case, the Puritan project in America bore witness to this paradox on a whole new level—where those fleeing religious persecution ended up establishing societies, cities, and colonies that were notorious for *their* religious persecutions. Standard treatments on this disheartening period of history can be found in MacCulloch, *The Reformation*; Philip Benedict, *Christ's Church Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Richard Dunn, *The Age of Religious Wars, 1559–1715* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1979); Cf. Hall, *The Puritans*.

Theology in a North American Context series, and Migliore's *Faith Seeking Understanding*

5. Theology of the Reformers: Calvin's *Institutes* and commentaries, and select works from Luther

Bibliology According to the Confessionally Reformed

For the Confessionally Reformed, the Bible does not merely *contain* God's "word" and "truth" but *is* these very things. Every single word of the scriptures is categorically divine writ. This is "verbal plenary inspiration" (or "plenary-verbal inspiration").⁹² As a whole, the Bible is a perfect source of infallible truths and a source of facts, data, and propositions/assertions. The *story* and *purpose* of the Bible are also important and true, but they are secondary (at least in day-to-day function) to its primal nature of being divine, exhaustively true, "enscripturated" text. The Bible is not just the best way of learning about salvation; it is the perfect and ultimate standard for all truth claims whatsoever.

"Inspiration extends not simply to a broad outline of the information communicated by the earthly authors," R. C. Sproul writes, "but to the very words of Scripture themselves."⁹³ As such, "although God did not personally write down the words that appear on the pages of the Bible, they are no less his words than if they had been delivered to us directly from heaven."⁹⁴ To distinguish Scripture from what it points to is wrong, for (in Sproul's view) "orthodox Christianity claims that Scripture not only bears witness to the truth but *is* the truth. It is the actual embodiment of divine revelation."⁹⁵ The medium is the referent; the messenger is the message; the Bible is not a *record of* revelation, but revelation. All of this, Sproul argues, is essentially Jesus's own perspective (and the same as the "Reformers"). The Bible is therefore "infallible" (unfailing) and "inerrant" (having no error), for "if the Word of God cannot fail, and if it cannot err, it does not fail or err."⁹⁶ "Limited inerrancy," which restricts Scripture's inerrancy to matters of "faith and practice" and leaves "out what the Bible says about history, science, and cultural matters," is a heresy.⁹⁷ *Everything* communicated in biblical literature is *ipso facto* without error.

In making these arguments, Sproul interprets John 10:35 ("Scripture cannot be broken") not as faithfulness (coming to pass) or being in force⁹⁸ but as saying

92 The "verbal" means inspiration extends to written speech; "plenary" means "full"—extending to every word and sentence, the meaning of sentences, the corpus, genre, the story, and all the rest. "Inspired" means it directly originates with God.

93 Sproul, *Everyone's a Theologian*, 28.

94 Sproul, *Everyone's a Theologian*, 26.

95 Sproul, *Everyone's a Theologian*, 29.

96 Sproul, *Everyone's a Theologian*, 34.

97 Sproul, *Everyone's a Theologian*, 31.

98 Note the CEB rendering ("can't be abolished") and NIV ("cannot be set aside").

“Scripture cannot make a mistake.” He also interprets John 17:17 (“your word is truth”) in the “High Priestly Prayer” not as meaning “what God says or promises in any form” but as essentially saying, “what the written scriptures assert.” Matthew 5:18⁹⁹ is interpreted non-hyperbolically to show that the Bible is inspired on the level of words. 2 Timothy 3:16¹⁰⁰ is assumed to affirm this entire perspective as a whole. This package of nuanced interpretations is a standard feature of Confessional Reformed bibliography.

Christian Scripture therefore exists in binary categories, being “inspired” or “uninspired,” with no blurring of lines. As the Westminster Confession records, the Protestant canon of sixty-six books identifies those “inspired” and those that are not (which have no higher status “than other human writings”¹⁰¹). The basis for this precise list is simply a re-working of the logic of the historical church and trusting that the church got it right.¹⁰²

Following Warfield, Robert Reymond likewise argues that “it is because the Bible is God’s Word that the church has always insisted not only upon its revelatory and divine character but also upon inspiration’s concomitant effect, infallibility.”¹⁰³ What is infallibility? “Essentially the same thing as” inerrancy—“namely that the Bible does not err in any of its affirmations, whether those affirmations be in the spheres of spiritual realities or morals, history or science, and is therefore incapable of teaching error.” Like Sproul, we read that “because the Bible is God’s Word, its assertions are as true as if God spoke to man today directly from heaven.”¹⁰⁴

Indeed, “we must approach the Scripture’s phenomena not inductively but presuppositionally,” meaning “we must not ground the case for the Bible’s inerrancy or lack thereof simply in an inductive study of the Bible’s phenomena alone” but “must take seriously what it says didactically about itself.”¹⁰⁵ That means “full” inerrancy: “If the Scripture is erroneous anywhere, then we have no assurance

99 “Not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.”

100 “All Scripture is God-breathed and is profitable for teaching, rebuke, correction, and training in righteousness.”

101 *WCF* 1.2–3

102 Sproul, *Everyone’s a Theologian*, 39.

103 Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 70. William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 328, offers a noteworthy point of correction on this matter: “the Church never at any time prior to the Reformation adopted a canonical account of inspiration. In fact, the early Church never even sanctioned a doctrine of divine revelation, content to leave this matter in the Scriptures and in the writings of the Fathers in an informal state. . . . Warfield’s own predecessors more often than not held to a doctrine of divine dictation, the precise doctrine which Warfield rejected. Thus, to go no further than Turretin, whose massive text in systematic theology was used for a generation at Princeton . . . we find the following comment: ‘Nor can we readily believe that God, who dictated and inspired each and every word to these inspired (*theopneustois*) men, would not take care of their entire preservation.’ Warfield was so blinded by his own theorizing that he totally ignored this material.”

104 Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 70.

105 Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 71.

that it is inerrantly truthful in what it teaches about [Jesus].” It is all or nothing. There is no general reliability or trustworthiness, or inspiration regarding message, story, or otherwise with regard to biblical literature. Either every single word has the same level of inspiration or none of it can be inspired.¹⁰⁶ Finally, as the literal Word of God, the Bible cannot appeal to higher standards of truth claims (e.g., be “verified” by external evidence). It is “intrinsically authoritative” and “self-authenticating.”¹⁰⁷ Claims of contradictions or historical inaccuracies/errors are automatically discounted because the Christian already knows in advance that the Bible is always right.

Reymond’s views on the canon and binary status is the same. In the end, there is no real way to tell what is “in” or “out.” But, even so, “the Christian must accept by faith that the church. . . got the number and the ‘list’ right.”¹⁰⁸ Whatever Luther was thinking by questioning the canonicity of James, “Luther got nowhere.”¹⁰⁹ In other words, the canon is partly known because of which list ended up being the victor. Reymond also implements the same texts and stock interpretations of John 10:35; 17:17; Matt 5:18; and 2 Tim 3:16.

John Frame’s bibliology is more sophisticated but essentially the same. The scriptures are self-authenticating, for “divine authorship is the ultimate reason why Scripture is authoritative” and its “authority is absolute because God’s authority is absolute.”¹¹⁰ The same principle applies for all the “attributes” of Scripture. The Bible is entirely verbally inspired and therefore inerrant.¹¹¹ Indeed, “Scripture’s claim to inerrancy is entirely clear. . . . It is God’s personal word to us. We must believe it, despite what we may be tempted to believe through an inductive examination of the phenomena.”¹¹² After all, “no one can fairly doubt that Scripture *claims* to be God’s written Word.”¹¹³

Likewise, inerrancy cannot be limited. The words of the prophets and apostles are “just as inerrant as the divine voice itself.”¹¹⁴ Furthermore, “The Bible is . . . not intended as a textbook of science, nor is it intended primarily to answer the types of questions we describe as scientific. Nevertheless . . . when Scripture

106 Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 73: “If then the Bible is God’s Word . . . then the Bible must be true, that is, without scientific or historical error or logical contradiction. This is not Cartesian rationalism. It is simply biblical/Christian rationalism.”

107 Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 78–79.

108 Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 67.

109 Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 67.

110 Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2010), 165; cf. 441.

111 Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 184: “The Bible is God’s permanent personal word,” and “nobody has ever *proved* the existence of a single error.” It is questionable how significant this point is since inerrancy (in a presuppositionalist self-authenticating view) is unfalsifiable.

112 Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 179.

113 Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 179.

114 Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 176.

touches on matters of interest to science, we must regard it as true and right.”¹¹⁵ None of these claims should raise any concerns amongst Christians, for “Unconditional obedience to verbal revelation is not idolatry of human words; it is simply a recognition of the divinity of God’s own words.”¹¹⁶

In summary, then: bibliology according to the Confessional Reformed is clear, certain, analytically deduced, and—much like the scriptures themselves—unquestionable for anyone who claims to be a Christian. Indeed, the epistemology assumed in formulating the doctrine is remarkably optimistic. The frequent use of “must” in the discourse is also notable—as is the defensive posture. There is no view of Scripture that is “too high,” and anything less is a threat to the faith. The Bible is also weaponized; it coerces and imposes itself upon the world, and threatens all those who do not submit. And somehow, it remains “authoritative” even when it has no functional authority over individuals’ day-to-day lives.

This black-and-white approach is also surrounded by explicit affirmations of *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*. Sproul, Reymond, and Frame all favorably cite this document in their explanations of Scripture’s truthfulness. (Sproul himself co-authored it.¹¹⁷) More pertinent for this article is that the bibliology of the Confessional Reformed is viewed as an exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith. This is largely what makes the “Confessional Reformed” both “confessional” and “reformed.” The authors we looked at above (Sproul, Reymond, and Frame) all make constant reference to the Confession and identify their view as the truly “reformed” view. The Confession does bear out many of the above conclusions, though not all.¹¹⁸

Bibliology According to the Calvinist Baptists

The bibliology of the Confessional Reformed and Calvinist Baptists¹¹⁹ is virtually indistinguishable.¹²⁰

115 Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 197

116 Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 439.

117 What is referred to by this “attribute” is “the autographs” (or the “original manuscripts”), not copies (which may, indeed, contain errors). Despite not having access to these theoretical “autographs” (the concept itself is highly disputed because of the gradual, evolutionary development of the text), the belief that they are inerrant is still viewed as a fundamental pillar of Christian orthodoxy and of the Christian faith as a whole.

118 The Confession asserts verbal plenary inspiration, biblical infallibility, a binary view of the canon and downplaying “non-canonical books” as purely “human,” and a generally propositional orientation regarding revelation. But the Confession also makes two notable assertions about the Bible that remain internally disputed—the Bible’s aesthetic and literary superiority and preservation through time (i.e., being faithfully—though apparently not inerrantly—copied since the beginning). Both of these topics will be briefly taken up below.

119 If you recall, Calvinist Baptists are not a direct descendent of Confessional Reformed Baptists (i.e., adherents of the 1689 London Baptist Confession) but rather have some of their primary heritage/inspiration in later figures such as Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892), Augustus Strong (1836–1921), and others.

120 One caveat that should be noted, however, is that Calvinist Baptists have a sharper history of

Wayne Grudem argues that “the authority of Scripture means that all the words in Scripture are God’s words in such a way that to disbelieve or disobey any word of Scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God.”¹²¹ This verbal-plenary inspiration summary is largely derived from the premise that there “are frequent claims in the Bible that all the words of Scripture are God’s words.” We know what the Bible is from reading what it purportedly says about itself. This perspective (along with other evidence) naturally suggests that “the words of Scripture are ‘self-attesting,’” for it is the highest “absolute authority.”¹²² Anything that challenges “God’s Word” (or at least a particular perception of what this means) is mistaken by the very nature of the case. For “God’s Word is itself *truth*.”¹²³ And for Grudem, this means that the Bible is not just God’s true and inspired word but “the ultimate standard of truth.” The Christian is “to think of the Bible as the ultimate standard of truth, the reference point by which every other claim to truthfulness is to be measured.”¹²⁴ This remains so regardless of the subject area. The Bible “always tells the truth concerning everything it talks about.”¹²⁵ It is a grave mistake to restrict Scripture’s attributes to any particular area of knowledge or aspect of human experience.

This “inerrancy” therefore means “that Scripture in the original manuscripts does not affirm anything that is contrary to fact.”¹²⁶ These properties are also attributed not only to “the original manuscripts” but also to the 66-book Protestant canon. Inspired books, like the Confessional Reformed, are categorized binarily: they are either God-breathed (“scripture”) or not. How does one know what is God-breathed? According to Grudem, God would not have given the church the wrong list: “Ultimately . . . we base our confidence in the correctness of our present canon on the faithfulness of God.”¹²⁷ The “non-biblical” books are only valuable for “historical and linguistic research.”¹²⁸

MacArthur and Richard Mayhue’s view is even more militant. The “biblical view” of inspiration is “Verbal, Plenary Inspiration.”¹²⁹ This means that “God through his Spirit inspired every word penned by the human authors in each of the sixty-six books of the Bible in the original documents (i.e., autographs). . . . It

asserting the Bible’s “literalness” than the Confessional Reformed. Because the rich interpretational history of reformed theology tends to be lacking in the more recent Calvinist Baptist tradition—and because the Calvinist Baptist tradition is more deeply influenced by the High Modernism of the late 1800s and early 1900s (which privileges literal and propositional language forms)—this hermeneutical trend is still worth noting even though it isn’t our focus.

- 121 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 73.
 122 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 78.
 123 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 83.
 124 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 83.
 125 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 83.
 126 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 91.
 127 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 66.
 128 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 60.
 129 MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 77.

refers to the direct act of God on the human author that resulted in the creation of perfectly written revelation.” This is said to be the direct implication of 2 Tim 3:16 and the view of Jesus himself.¹³⁰ Despite being imperfect authors, “God produced infallible and inerrant words through them.”¹³¹ “Deniers” of inerrancy “seek to excuse sin and to affirm unbiblical behaviors” by being unwilling to accept all “that the scripture declares.”¹³² In other words, the reason people do not affirm inerrancy is not that they have studied it and come to different conclusions. Rather, they want a license to commit immorality.

Like the Confessional Reformed, the “inspired” and “uninspired” construct determines one’s reading of church history on the canon.¹³³ The 66-book canon is known because there simply is no biblical reason to question it. In fact, MacArthur and Mayhue go further in suggesting that there *are* biblical reasons for believing in the 66-book canon.¹³⁴ Following the Confessional Reformed, the same set of proof-texts are used to substantiate this entire bibliology—which is explicitly identified as “biblicist.”¹³⁵

David Dockery’s view in *A Theology for the Church* is, like Frame in the Confessional Reformed, more sophisticated and qualified.¹³⁶ But (again like Frame) the conclusions are all the same. In looking at “the Bible’s Witness to Itself,” the same arguments for “plenary-verbal inspiration” are made.¹³⁷ The Bible is inerrant about everything it addresses.¹³⁸ The Bible should be treated like it fell out of heaven—even though we know it did *not* fall “from heaven on a parachute.”¹³⁹ Inerrancy may not be necessary for salvation, but it is required “to maintain an

130 MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 91.

131 MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 81.

132 MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 109.

133 Although Sproul is known for saying “The Bible is a fallible collection of infallible books,” the uncertainty this leaves has been recently closed by Michael Krueger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), who attempts to argue that the canon is, in fact, a product of God’s own special work and therefore can have the kind of confidence Sproul seems to withhold. (A similar debate occurred between Sproul and Greg Bahnsen in the 1970s over the nature of certainty in apologetics; Sproul again, realizing human limitations, asserted that we can only have probabilities, while Bahnsen asserted certainty).

134 MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 126: “Based on solid biblical reasoning, we can conclude that the canon is and will remain closed. There will be no sixty-seventh book of the Bible.”

135 MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 26.

136 Cf. his monograph on the subject, David Dockery, *Christian Scripture: An Evangelical Perspective on Inspiration, Authority and Interpretation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004).

137 Dockery, *A Theology for the Church*, 115: “[The Bible is] the Word of God written in the words of man.”

138 Dockery, *A Theology for the Church*, 126: “It does not follow that because the Bible emphasizes one thing, it errs in less crucial or less important matters. . . . It is not proper to conclude that because the Bible emphasizes salvation, it can be trusted on that matter, but that since it does not emphasize history, it may err in historical details.”

139 Dockery, *A Theology for the Church*, 128.

orthodox confession in salvific matters.”¹⁴⁰ Indeed, “inerrancy applies to all areas of knowledge since all truth is God’s truth.”¹⁴¹

Dockery does not accuse “deniers” of this bibliology of legitimizing immoral actions like MacArthur and Mayhue do. In fact, he maintains that inerrancy “is not a direct teaching of Scripture (though Matt 5:18 and John 10:35; 17:17 may point in that direction) but is a direct implication and important corollary of the direct teaching about Scripture’s inspiration.”¹⁴² Nevertheless, like Grudem and MacArthur, the canon is viewed as a fixed, binarily-categorized collection that should be believed because of God’s providence in “collection and preservation.”¹⁴³

Bibliology According to Neocalvinists

The doctrine of Scripture according to Neocalvinists is both similar to and noticeably different from the Confessional Reformed and Calvinist Baptists. Instead of an explicit “verbal-plenary inspiration” doctrine, the Dutch theologians assert an “organic,” “graphic,” or “incarnational” view of the Bible. The two views overlap but exhibit fissures. The Dutch theologians also tend to speak of Scripture’s “attributes” in a more qualified way. In fact, they intentionally distance themselves from hard conservative views (i.e., Old Princeton) even while maintaining continuity. The views of Kuyper, Bavinck, and Plantinga et al. (henceforth “Plantinga”) represent a *theology in transition* that stretches from the modern period to more contemporary developments.

Kuyper begins his discussion of Scripture in *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology* with a noticeable philosophical tone because of the relationship between inspiration and miracles and because the whole cosmos is being re-created.¹⁴⁴ These bigger ideas shape one’s bibliology. “Wherever the Scripture speaks of a *renewal*,” he argues, “it is never meant that a new *power* should originate, or a new *state of being* should arise, but simply that a new shoot springs from the root of creation itself, that of his new shoot a graft is entered upon the old tree, and that in this way the entire plant is renewed and completed.”¹⁴⁵ “The miracle” is therefore “not

140 Dockery, *A Theology for the Church*, 133.

141 Dockery, *A Theology for the Church*, 136.

142 Dockery, *A Theology for the Church*, 136.

143 Dockery, *A Theology for the Church*, 145.

144 Kuyper, *Sacred Theology*, 414: He talks about “the Divine energy” that “in the face of disorder brings His cosmos to realize that end which was determined upon in His counsel.” And “every interpretation of the miracle as a magical incident without connection with the palingenesis of the whole cosmos, which Jesus refers to in Matt. xix. 28, and therefore without relation to the entire metamorphosis which awaits the cosmos after the last judgement, does not enhance the glory of God, but debates the Recreator of heaven and earth to juggler.” “This entire recreative action of the Divine energy,” he goes on (415–16), “is one continuous miracle, which shows itself in the radical renewal of the life of man by regeneration.”

145 Kuyper, *Sacred Theology*, 428.

mechanically added to nature, but is organically united to it.¹⁴⁶ God's work in the world should not be viewed as an alien invasion, or God's revelation as the mere outside injection of new information. This is the modern, dualistic perspective of creation Kuyper is more or less countering. Instead, there is an "organic" relationship within (God's) world.¹⁴⁷

Kuyper then introduces the study of inspiration (§ 77) with the following preface: "The naïve catechetical method of proving the inspiration of the Holy Scripture from 2 Tim. iii. 16 or 2 Pet. i. 21, cannot be laid to the charge of our Reformed theologians."¹⁴⁸ Kuyper is obviously aware of those who proof-texted in the reformed churches¹⁴⁹ and dissenters who "did not hesitate to expose the inconclusiveness of such circle-reasoning." However, for Kuyper, there is still a coherent logic to the self-authorization of Scripture.¹⁵⁰

Kuyper then looks at Jesus's view of the Old Testament and comes to many conclusions of the Confessional Reformed.¹⁵¹ He affirms the Bible's trustworthiness, authority, and central role in revealing God's redemptive plan for the world. But he also gets into details most others neglect, such as the problem of the continual evolution and redaction of the biblical text. His band-aid solution is that "graphic inspiration must then have been extended to these editors, since they indeed delivered the writings, in the form in which they were to be possessed by the Church."¹⁵² But the revisions by editors who were "unauthorized . . . of course must be excluded."¹⁵³ In the end, the certainty of what we have today is not by arguments or "intellect" anyway, but by "faith." For "as soon as it is thought that the holy ore of the Scripture can be weighed in the balance with mathematical accuracy, the eye of faith becomes clouded, and the gold is less clearly seen."¹⁵⁴ In

146 Kuyper, *Sacred Theology*, 428.

147 Later twentieth-century reformed thinkers would go further along this line (and some would argue, with some of Calvin's ideas), such as Jürgen Moltmann and other panentheists.

148 Kuyper, *Sacred Theology*, 428.

149 A possible emphasis on "our reformed theologians" might suggest he is contrasting to "those theologians" (aka American).

150 Kuyper, *Sacred Theology*, 429: "As the botanist cannot learn to know the nature of life of the plant except from the plant itself, the theologian also has no other way at command, by which to understand the nature of inspiration, except the interrogating of the Scripture itself."

151 E.g., that the authority of scriptural writings can, at least at times, be attributed "even to single words." Kuyper, *Sacred Theology*, 435.

152 Kuyper, *Sacred Theology*, 549.

153 Kuyper, *Sacred Theology*, 550. Readers aren't told how one discerns the difference between an "authorized" and "unauthorized" redactor, any more than one identifies a/the singular, autographic text. More confusion arises when Kuyper says (2.127) inspiration concerns "the production of the autograph in the form intended by God, at the moment it enters the canon." Typically, "entering the canon" is a separate event and subject from inspired "enscripturation" in Protestant theology. This "moment" also differs between books and may have extended over centuries.

154 Kuyper, *Sacred Theology*, 550.

fact, Kuyper goes as far as to say that “the Scripture by itself is as dull as a diamond in the dark,” for only illumination by the Spirit can open our eyes.¹⁵⁵

In putting up guard rails against an overly scholastic bibliography, he contends that this “process of conviction . . . ends as *Scripture* by imposing sacred obligations upon us, as *Holy Book* by exercising over us moral compulsion and spiritual power,” and “it is moreover incapable of maintaining itself theoretically and of continuing itself according to a definable system.”¹⁵⁶ The Bible as *living* and *compelling* is more important than its theoretical consistency.¹⁵⁷ Without the witness of the Spirit and personal conviction, “the truth . . . of graphic inspiration can never be derived.”¹⁵⁸ Elsewhere, Kuyper pushes further against a rigid fundamentalist view: “Whoever in reading Scripture thinks that everything was spoken as precisely as it stands in the text, is totally mistaken.”¹⁵⁹ Scripture provides not a verbatim account but a summary one (*procès-analytique* not *procès-verbal*).¹⁶⁰

Kuyper then summarizes his views (in typical political overtones) in a sentence: “The whole question of inspiration virtually amounts to this: whether God shall be denied or granted the sovereign right of employing, if so needed and desired, the factors which He himself created in man, by which to communicate to man what He purposed to reveal respecting the maintenance of His own majesty, the execution of His world-plan, and the salvation of His elect.”¹⁶¹ In other words, *however* Scripture came into being, God has the right to use those means to produce something unique and for God’s purposes.

Bavinck was as intellectually rigorous as Kuyper but more refined in his presentation.¹⁶² He uses Paul’s organic metaphor of the church (a “body”) to help his readers get a sense of how the Bible is “inspired”:

Inspiration has to be viewed organically, so that even the lowliest part

155 Kuyper, *Sacred Theology*, 551.

156 Kuyper, *Sacred Theology*, 561.

157 Kuyper was almost certainly aware of the flaws in his doctrine of Scripture and irresolvable problems such as those just mentioned above regarding the concept of “originals” and the evolution of the text.

158 Kuyper, *Sacred Theology*, 561.

159 The Confessional Reformed theologian Richard B. Gaffin Jr. summarizes the tension between all these claims in Kuyper’s thought: “The biblical records are impressionistic; that is, they are not marked by notarial precision or blueprint, architectural exactness. At the same time this impressionistic quality does not detract from their certainty. . . . The biblical narratives do not record the past with stenographic preciseness or photographic exactness. Yet as historical records they are completely accurate and do not at all mislead.” Abraham Kuyper, *Locus de Sacra Scriptura, creatione, creaturis* (Grand Rapids: J. B. Hulst, n.d.), 2.130–31, cited in Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *God’s Word in Servant-Form: Abraham and Herman Bavinck on the Doctrine of Scripture* (Jackson: Reformed Academic Press, 2008), 34.

160 Kuyper cited in Gaffin, 34–35.

161 Kuyper, *Sacred Theology*, 552.

162 Bavinck replaced Kuyper as the chair of systematic theology at Vrije Universiteit (founded by Kuyper).

has its place and meaning and at the same time is much farther removed from the center than other parts. In the human organism nothing is accidental, neither its length, nor its breadth, not its color or its tint. This is not, however, to say that everything is equally closely connected with its life center. The head and the heart occupy a much more important place in the body than the hand or the foot, and these again are greatly superior in value to the nails and the hair. In Scripture, as well, not everything is equally close to the center. There is a periphery, which moves in a wide path around the center, yet also that periphery belongs to the circle of divine thoughts.¹⁶³

The Confessional Reformed and Calvinist Baptists would rarely (if ever) speak of any part of the Bible as being “lowly” and also would be hesitant to say “not everything is equally close to the center.” But, as Kuyper also summarized, *there is* a “center” for the Bible—and this matters for how the believer uses it.

Bavinck also uses the incarnation as another analogy: “For divine revelation to fully enter the life of humankind, it assumed the servant form of written language. In this sense Scripture too is an incarnation of God, the product of God’s incarnation in Christ.”¹⁶⁴ As such, “the word [logos] of revelation similarly assumes the imperfect and inadequate form of Scripture. But thus alone revelation becomes the good of humankind.”¹⁶⁵ Again, it would be objectionable for the Confessional Reformed and Calvinist Baptists to even use the terms “imperfect” and “inadequate” in reference to God’s holy Word.¹⁶⁶

“The right view,” Bavinck continues, “is one in which Scripture is neither equated with revelation nor detached from it and placed outside of it.” Contrary to verbal-plenary inspiration, where the Bible is essentially a “paper pope,” the Bible *can* (and should) be distinguished from revelation. The same is true in

163 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:438–39. He continues, “Accordingly, there are no kinds and degrees in ‘graphic’ inspiration. The hair of one’s head shares in the same life as the heart and the hand. There is one and the same Spirit from whom, through consciousness of the authors, the whole Scripture has come. But there is a difference in the manner in which the same life is present and active in the different parts of the body. *There is diversity of gifts, also in Scripture, but it is the same Spirit.*”

164 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 354.

165 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 382.

166 This is especially true given *WCF* 1.5.

distinguishing between the sign and the signified.¹⁶⁷ However, for Bavinck, this is not the same as saying that the word (*logos*) “is” the Bible—which *can* be stated as such given its incarnational existence: “Scripture is the word of God; it not only contains but *is* the word of God. But the formal and material element may not be split up.” Again, this assertion is made within the context of an incarnational bibliography: “it has the Word-made-flesh as its matter and content. Form and content interpenetrate each other and are inseparable.”¹⁶⁸ Thus, the Christian can say “Jesus is God” and the “Bible is the Word of God” in a remarkably similar way, leaving plenty of room for mystery.¹⁶⁹

In contrast to Confessional Reformed and Calvinist Baptist bibliologies, Scripture is not primarily viewed or used for its factual value, informative value, or even historical-narrative value. This modern emphasis needs correcting, for the *purpose* of the Bible is salvific and pragmatic:

Holy Scripture is not an arid story or ancient chronicle but the ever-living, eternally youthful Word, which God, now and always, issues to his people. It is the eternally ongoing speech of God to us. It does not just serve to give us historical information; *it does not even have the intent to furnish us a historical story by the standard of reliability demanded in other realms of knowledge*. Holy Scripture is tendentious: whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.¹⁷⁰

To put it differently, the Bible is primarily *theological* and ought to be read as such. Bavinck, like the Confessional Reformed and Baptist Calvinists, notes that the Bible is not written in regard to scientific matters. However, in contrast, Bavinck does not then conclude by saying a person has to believe whatever is asserted anyway. Instead, he points readers back to the Bible’s point:

[Scripture] is not designed to be a manual for the various sciences. It

167 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 378: “But just as the thought embodies itself in a word, so words are embodied in Scripture. And language itself is no more than a body of signs, audible signs. And the audible sign naturally seeks stability in the visible sign, in writing. The art of writing is actually the art of recording signs and, in a broad sense, while it occurs among all peoples, has gradually developed from pictograms through ideograms to alphabetic script. However refined and increased in precision, it is inadequate. Our thinking, says Augustine, fails to do justice to the subject, and our speech fails to measure up to our thoughts; so also there is a big gap between the spoken word and the written word. The sounds are always only roughly reproduced in visible signs. Thought is richer than speech, and speech is richer than writing. Still, the written word is of immense value and importance.”

168 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 443.

169 As Bavinck famously begins his *Dogmatics*, “Mystery is the lifeblood [or vital element] of dogmatics.”

170 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 385; emphasis mine.

is the first foundation (*principium*) only of theology and desires that we will read and study it *theologically*. In all the disciplines that are grouped around Scripture, our aim must be the saving knowledge of God. For *that* purpose Scripture offers us all the data needed. In *that* sense it is completely adequate and complete. But those who would infer from Scripture a history of Israel, a biography of Jesus, a history of Israel's or early-Christian literature, etc. will in each case end up disappointed.¹⁷¹

Thus, in contrast to the Confessional Reformed and Calvinist Baptists, it is illegitimate to treat the Bible as the ultimate authority for all truth claims whatsoever. Bavinck would have rejected the Chicago Statement on how the Bible “is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches.”¹⁷² True, inspiration and authority are tied together.¹⁷³ Scripture is even said to be self-attesting.¹⁷⁴ However, as Bavinck labors to show, all of these claims (as conflicting as they may be),¹⁷⁵ must be understood within the larger context of the Bible's final purpose.¹⁷⁶

One therefore ought to be cautious about emphasizing Scripture's inerrancy: “Inspiration should not be reduced to mere preservation from error, nor should it be taken in a ‘dynamic’ way as the inspiration of persons. . . . Neither a ‘dynamic’ nor a ‘mechanical’ view suffices. The proper view of biblical inspiration is the organic one, which underscores the servant form of Scripture. The Bible is God's

171 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 444.

172 Point 2 under “A Short Statement” in the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.

173 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 462: “There is in fact only one ground on which the authority of Scripture can be based, and that is its inspiration. When that goes, also the authority of Scripture is gone and done with.”

174 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatic*, 481: “There is no higher appeal from Scripture. It is the supreme court of appeal. No power or pronouncement stands above it. It is Scripture, finally, which decides matters in the conscience of everyone personally. And for that reason *it* is the supreme arbiter of controversies.” Cf. 589: “The authority of Scripture rests in itself and cannot be proven. Holy Scripture is self-attested . . . and therefore the final ground of faith. No deeper ground can be advanced. To the question ‘Why do you believe Scripture?’ the only answer is: ‘Because it is the word of God.’”

175 Focusing on these nitty-gritty details of bibliology illustrates Bavinck's liminality. He was a dedicated Christian thinker with a foot in two worlds—one in the sixteenth century and another in the hey-day of modernism and higher criticism.

176 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 444: “Scripture does not satisfy the demand for exact knowledge in the way we demand it in mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, etc. This is a standard that may not be applied to it. For that reason, moreover, the autographa were lost; for that reason the text—to whatever small degree this is the case—is corrupt; for that reason the church, and truly not just the layman, has the Bible only in defective and fallible translations. These are undeniable facts. And these facts teach us that Scripture has a criterion of its own, requires and interpretation of its own, and has a purpose and intention of its own. That intention is no other than that it should make us ‘wise unto salvation.’” Notice the potential confusion in Bavinck's conflation of textual criticism and translational issues. To be consistent (assuming our translations of Bavinck's Dutch are accurate), he should have either said, “the text . . . is corrupt; for that reason the church . . . has the Bible only in defective and fallible *editions*,” not “fallible translations” (which originate from critical editions).

word in human language.”¹⁷⁷ While Bavinck affirms a type of verbal inspiration (“the Bible is God’s word in human language”), he is again careful to distance it from the biblicism of his American contemporaries.¹⁷⁸ And, again, because “the purpose of Scripture” is “to make use wise unto salvation (2 Timothy 3:15),”¹⁷⁹ not all Scripture has the same importance. “Though Scripture is true in everything, this truth is certainly not homogeneous in all its components.”¹⁸⁰

Plantinga et al. marks a further movement in the Neocalvinist tradition. What is implicit in much of Kuyper and Bavinck is made explicit (and extended), and what is downplayed is directly questioned. Hence, “Scripture is the faithful witness to God’s historical redemptive acts that culminate in the Christ event.”¹⁸¹ Scripture is not “self-authenticating” as much as a signpost to the God who acts in history. Still, “The written word has its origin and inspiration in God, but it came to the covenant people through history, culture, language, and human mediation.”¹⁸² The real reason the Bible “can be referred to as the word of God [is] because it faithfully mediates the story of the incarnate Word, the gospel—Christianity’s fundamental hope and declaration.”¹⁸³

This summary is similar to Kuyper’s own conclusion but without the thick details about various “how” matters (e.g., modes of authorial consciousness, redaction inspiration, autograph production, etc.). The authors, like Bavinck,

177 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 388–89. He continues: “Organic inspiration is ‘graphic’ inspiration, and it is foolish to distinguish inspired thoughts from words and words from letters. Scripture must not be read atomistically, as though each word or letter by itself has its own divine meaning. Words are included in thoughts and vowels in words. The full humanity of human language is taken seriously in the notion of organic inspiration.” Gaffin, *God’s Word in Servant-Form*, 81, says, “Admittedly Bavinck has little to say about the issue of error in relation to Scripture or its infallibility, at least in his development of the doctrine of inspiration. This is all the more remarkable in view of the times in which he was writing. This sparsity, however, should not be read as disinterest or uncertainty on the issue of biblical infallibility.” I would suggest that it has to do with (a) a bibliology that is undergoing revision and reconstruction in light of critical scholarship and (b) a just and wise caution about conforming to old Princeton’s staunch and increasingly loud biblicism.

178 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 438: “Nor does it follow that every word is full of divine wisdom, that every jot and tittle is charged with infinite content. Certainly, everything has its meaning, provided it is seen in its place and in the context in which it occurs. Scripture may not be viewed atomistically as though every word and letter by itself is inspired by God as such and has its own meaning with its own finite, divine content. This approach leads to the foolish hermeneutical rules of the Jewish scribes and, rather than honoring Scripture, dishonors it.” Oddly, Bavinck later cites Jerome (401) saying “Each and every speech, all syllables, marks and periods in the divine scriptures are full of meanings and breathe heavenly sacraments” and himself, “Just as Christ’s human nature, however weak and lowly, remained free from sin, so also Scripture is ‘conceived without defect or stain; totally human in all its parts but also divine in all its parts’ (435). Given this tension, perhaps it is no surprise that he concludes with some ambiguity: “Although in the last several decades a great deal of attention and effort has been devoted to the doctrine of Scripture, no one will claim that a satisfactory solution has been found” (419).

179 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 389.

180 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 447.

181 Plantinga, Thompson, and Lundberg, *Christian Theology*, 57.

182 Plantinga, Thompson, and Lundberg, *Christian Theology*, 57.

183 Plantinga, Thompson, and Lundberg, *Christian Theology*, 57.

implement the incarnation analogy: “just as Christ is the ‘faithful witness’ to who God is (Rev 1:5), so also the Bible is a faithful witness to the Christ event.”¹⁸⁴ In interpreting 2 Pet 1:21 and 2 Tim 3:16, the authors avoid the weight that the Confessional Reformed and Calvinist Baptist put on them. Rather, it is simply said that “Christians hold that scripture has the very breath of God in it, that the very Spirit of God is at work in and through it.”¹⁸⁵

Finally, “scripture is completely dependable and trustworthy for doctrine and life, but not necessarily for other matters.” And while “infallible” can legitimately mean “trustworthy” with reference to the Bible, “inerrancy” is “an overly modernist and constricting criterion of historical truth (largely in the attempt to meet the Enlightenment challenge on its own ground) that is foreign to the world of the Bible itself.”¹⁸⁶

Bibliology According to the Progressive Reformed

The Progressive Reformed view of Scripture is largely “modernized” in the sense that it plainly acknowledges how past bibliologies are products of their time and need updating or replacing. Verbal-plenary inspiration, infallibility and inerrancy, canonical binarism, etc. are intentionally critiqued. The Bible is God’s Word metaphorically, not literally.¹⁸⁷ And the dualism between “Scripture and tradition” is illusory, since it is recognized that Scripture, properly speaking, *is* tradition.

However, it would be a mistake to simply attribute Progressive Reformed bibliologies to a reductionistic “liberal theology” centered on morals and moral living, leaving the Bible to sit as a secular anthology of religious literature. Scripture’s derivative nature is assumed since it is seen as a medium to communicate something crucial from God—and this more than spiritual truths and moral principles. In short, the Progressive Reformed do affirm that *God is speaking in scripture*, but it is primarily through Christ and transformative narratives instead of a magical process of “enscripturation” and “verbal plenary inspiration.”

Guthrie in *Christian Doctrine* plainly states that “our faith is not in the book but in the God we learn to know in it. It is *God*, not the Bible, who rules and

184 Plantinga, Thompson, and Lundberg, *Christian Theology*, 58.

185 Plantinga, Thompson, and Lundberg, *Christian Theology*, 59.

186 Plantinga, Thompson, and Lundberg, *Christian Theology*, 61.

187 Contemporary cognitive linguistics and etymologists have long noted how all words were once metaphorical and then gradually shift to more literal descriptions. The same appears to be true with specific theological doctrines. In this writer’s experience, because conservative Reformed and evangelical thinkers are so steeped in the literal, quantifiable, imminent world of the Enlightenment, it takes considerable effort to get such persons to understand how metaphors like “God the Father” or “Jesus the Son” are metaphors and not literal descriptions. In fact, such efforts are frequently viewed as somehow threatening.

judges, helps and saves, in whom we trust.”¹⁸⁸ This principle also applies to the authors: “We do not ‘believe in’ Isaiah or Paul or John; we believe in Jesus Christ.”¹⁸⁹ And Christ is the supreme special “self-revelation of God.” The Bible is important, authoritative, and “revelation” to the extent that it gives us access to this God. Similar to Bavinck, Guthrie concludes that “in this sense—a secondary sense—the Bible is not only a witness to revelation; it is itself revelation. . . . We know the word of God in person only in and through the written word of God.”¹⁹⁰ In that way, “We believe the Bible just when we do not believe *in* the Bible but in the living, acting, speaking God to whom the biblical writers introduce us.”¹⁹¹

Because of this key distinction, however, there is no period of “enscripturation,” as if divine words are supernaturally etched on a page and then never again for eternity. “God’s self-revelation does continue,” he argues. “Redemptive history,” God’s acts of grace and speech did not end with some real or theoretical closing of “the canon.” How, then, does the church discern what is God’s speaking today? *By reading the Bible*, for “it is only by listening to the story of the past revelation of God recorded in the Bible that we are able to recognize what God is saying and doing in and through the church in our time. The past revelation is ‘normative’ revelation that enables us to distinguish between what God is saying and doing in our time and what is only the questionable human word and work of the church, its ministers and/or its members.”¹⁹² Guthrie goes on to provide concrete examples of this in the local church, for God continues to reconcile the world in the present just as much as in past “Bible times.”

Douglas Hall in *Thinking the Faith* remarks that because the Bible is “event plus interpretation,” the “Bible is of immediate and primary significance. . . because it is for all intents and purposes *the sole witness* to this foundational history.”¹⁹³ Theology itself therefore “assumes an ongoing dialogue with the biblical record.” The challenging task facing the church is not raw obedience to divine propositions as much as participating in a life-changing conversation. Nevertheless, this faith in the God of history and dialogue with the scriptures entail response. “Faith which intends to be Christian must be prepared to listen to and submit itself to the authority of the scriptures,”¹⁹⁴ Hall remarks. This is, in fact, the concept of *sola scriptura*: “Only of the canonical Scriptures of the two Testaments were the

188 Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, anniv. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2018 [orig. 1968; rev. 1994]), 63. The overlap of Plantinga et al.’s bibliology (the furthest “left” in Neocalvinist Reformed Theology) obviously overlaps with Guthrie (the furthest “right” in Progressive Reformed Theology).

189 Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, 63.

190 Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, 63.

191 Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, 63.

192 Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, 64.

193 Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, 258.

194 Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, 258.

Reformers willing to say this.¹⁹⁵ This is not the same as “American biblicism,” which has “only slightly camouflaged fascistic political overtones”¹⁹⁶ and “makes it more and more difficult for responsible Christian scholarship to embrace a theology of biblical authority without appearing to endorse biblical literalism and much besides.”¹⁹⁷ In other words, the explicit biblicism of the Confessional Reformed and Calvinist Baptists actually exhibits a *low* view of Scripture because it is neither credible academically nor helpful theologically and spiritually.¹⁹⁸ The challenge for the Christian today, Hall contends, is that “we have to justify theology’s use of the Bible over against the secular charge of relativism; on the other hand we must explain why, unlike biblicism, we cannot treat the Bible as if *it* were absolute.”¹⁹⁹

Hall attempts to do this. To the secularists and hard liberals, he argues that if something is genuinely revealed or communicated, “then you must have access to the most reliable witnesses to those events and persons.” If you do not, then theology is cut off from a key source of its work. Furthermore, to the biblicists and fundamentalists, who contend that “theology must be nothing more or less than the faithful exposition of the Scriptures,” the absolute mystery of God must be part of theologizing. Theology is *theology*; the scriptures and traditions themselves assert that God “transcends all description and expression.”²⁰⁰

For Hall, fundamentalist bibliologies are more problematic than refusing to acknowledge our epistemological limitations. “Christians who elevate the Bible to the level of the absolute are just as guilty of idolatry as other Christians (whom the biblicists invariably berate) who absolutize holy objects, or saintly persons, or ecclesial authorities. Biblicists are perhaps even more susceptible to the charge of idolatry, because their idol, the Bible, frankly, warns them against any such elevation of itself.” For even Jesus “rejects the primitive biblicism of many persons whom he encounters” and “admonishes against literalism especially, for its rigid adherence to the letter precludes spiritual perceptiveness and imagination.”²⁰¹ In this reading, “not even the words *Jesus* speaks, which these writers may or may not have transcribed accurately, can command our ultimate loyalty, but only the Word that *Jesus is*. *He* is ‘the Truth’ (John 14:6), and the world itself could not

195 Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, 258–59.

196 This criticism could be legitimately leveled against Kuyper (examined earlier), who predominately sees inspiration as essentially a coercive act of a divine sovereign that leaves earthly citizens without excuse.

197 Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, 259.

198 Cf. Peter Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable to Read It* (New York: HarperOne, 2015); and Bovell, *Rehabilitating Inerrancy*.

199 Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, 258–59.

200 Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, 258–59.

201 Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, 258–59.

contain the books that would have to be written to describe the Truth that he is and does (John 21:25).²⁰²

Hall therefore turns the fundamentalist/conservative argument on its head. A “high” view of Scripture is a realistic one that keeps God and the gospel at its center, not the Bible. The biblicist view is not the view of Jesus but the view of *his opponents*, who could mechanically quote chapter while missing the point. A rigid, “Bible-centered” orientation is detrimental.²⁰³ The problem becomes visible when people say “I’ve got it right here in the Bible,” where “the real emphasis, as distinct from the rhetorical one, is on the first word of the sentence—‘I’ve’!”²⁰⁴ This lust for certainty and objectification of the *living* Word kills it.²⁰⁵ “Religion wants to have something quite concrete—something that can be *had*.” In these unfortunate cases of contemporary Protestant life, “The Bible appears a veritable extension of their persons.”²⁰⁶ Indeed, conservative pastors and thinkers ironically give their own opinions the weight of the divine word by denying that this is happening; “I’m just repeating what God says” is a cover.²⁰⁷

Another irony is that conservative Reformed theologies are a mirror-image of the Catholicism they were originally trying to refute. “An authoritarian church with concrete regulations and practices and rites,” Hall remarks, “was replaced by an authoritarian book which could also convey the impression of concreteness and certitude—which even had the advantage of being portable, of being subject to ownership, of adorning one’s home, one’s meal table, one’s bed-sides.”²⁰⁸ The

202 Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, 261.

203 Cf. Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So*; Carlos Bovell, *Rehabilitating Inerrancy in a Culture of Fear*; Jamin Andreas Hübner, “Ryan Reeves and Charles E. Hill, ‘Know How We Got Our Bible,’” *Canadian-American Theological Review* 6.2 (2017): 94–96. It is not a coincidence that Enns is a former professor of Westminster Theological Seminary (East), Bovell an alum, and Hübner an alum of Dordt University and Reformed Theological Seminary.

204 Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, 261.

205 Cf. James Dunn, *The Living Word*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), vii, 147: “A primary feeder of fundamentalism is the lust for certainty and security. It is the certainty that God has spoken in particular words and formulations which are clear-cut and fixed for all time, which alone gives the fundamentalist the security (s)he craves for. . . . Fundamentalism shows itself unwilling to accept the unavoidable inadequacy of human speech to express God’s self-revelation, the degree of historical particularity in most biblical texts that prevents their being absolutized, and the different kinds of literature in scripture and the different conventions behind them, all of which should caution a modern reader straightforwardly reading off historical fact and Christian doctrine from these texts simply because they are in the Bible. The lust for certainty turns the icon into an idol, pulls the living word from the soil in which it was rooted, turns the metaphor into a mathematical formula, and abuses the scriptural authority it seeks to affirm.”

206 Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, 261.

207 This problem is amplified in “from the pulpit” traditions. Via the raised platform, it is assumed that everyone is obliged to obey and believe as if God was speaking from the throne. It carries the same weight, and such “preaching of the Word” is spiritually binding on all persons. Hall contends that the opposite should be true: human words should be given the weight of human words, whether “from the pulpit” or not. Whether something unique and prophetic has happened during an oration (as may occur cannot be guaranteed by any assent to a confession or to any doctrine of Scripture).

208 Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, 262.

real risk of arming the masses with the weapon of a paper-pope are evident in the immediate centuries following post-reformation scholasticism—from heretic burning, to internal dissension, to witch trials, to all-out wars. In the end, Protestants failed to put God (who alone is absolute) in the center.

What, then, are we doing with the Bible in theology? Not looking for “correct answers” but encountering it “as a storyteller lives with what seems the original and most authentic version of the story he or she is trying to tell, now, under difference circumstances. For the disciple community, in other words, the Bible exists as its fundamental source of imagination and courage.”²⁰⁹ This is its “inspirational function.” The secondary function—providing true information—is important but “subservient to its inspirational function.”²¹⁰

Migliore shares all of the same basic concerns as Guthrie and Hall. The Reformers brought some common sense to a theological world gone wild. But the second and third generations of reformed theologians overshot the authority, accuracy, and place of the Bible. “Many people inside and outside the church equate the idea of the authority of the Bible with retrenchment rather than renewal, with coercion rather than liberty, with terror rather than joy. They know all too well how to the authority of the Bible has been invoked to suppress free inquiry and to legitimize such practices as slavery and patriarchy.”²¹¹

The church has to get back to the real point of the Bible. “Scripture,” Migliore plainly states, “is the unique and irreplaceable witness to the liberating and reconciling activity of God in the history of Israel and supremely in Jesus Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Scripture serves the purpose of mediating the good news of the astonishing grace of God in Christ that moves us to greater love of God and neighbor and calls us to the freedom for which Christ has set us free.”²¹² If the Bible does not produce those results, either something is wrong with the Bible or wrong with our perspective on the Bible.

Migliore identifies four “inadequate approaches to the authority of Scripture”: (1) biblicism, (2) historical source, (3) religious classic, and (4) private devotional text. In each case, the Bible is reduced down to a single purpose or idea that cannot capture its real nature and, sometimes, is alien to the Bible’s real purpose altogether. In biblicism, for example, “the Bible is authoritative by virtue of its *supernatural origin* and the direct identity of words with the Word of God.”²¹³ One major problem with this view is its reduction to verbal-plenary inspiration because “the Word of God is not directly accessible, not a possession under our control.” Rather, “The Word of God is an act of God in which the God who has

209 Cf. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*.

210 Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, 262.

211 Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 46.

212 Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 46–47.

213 Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 47.

spoken continues to speak here and now by the power of the Spirit through the witness of Scripture and its proclamation by the church.”²¹⁴

Another problem is “infallibility” and inerrancy. Like Hall, Migliore notes that “the church that wants an absolute guarantee of its faith and proclamation finds it in the parallel doctrines of biblical and papal infallibility.”²¹⁵ Each doctrine evolved and became codified in parallel competition. “But a church with an infallible teaching office or an infallible Bible no longer allows Scripture to work as liberating and life-giving Word in its own way. Insistence on the infallibility obscures the true basis of Christian confidence.”²¹⁶ In biblicism, the Bible is authoritative not because of “what” it tells us about God or humanity, or because of its “effect,” or its “constitutive role in the life of the Christianity community,” but simply because its words are God’s words without qualification. With Bavinck, Migliore says the danger here is that it tends to level all the texts in terms of importance. “Biblicism turns the life-giving, Spirit-empowered authority of Scripture into a deadening authoritarianism.”²¹⁷

Beyond the dead letter of biblicism, the uncritical assumptions of historicism, the narrowness of bourgeois privatism, and the detachment of aestheticism lies the real authority of Scripture in the life of the community of faith. Christians do not believe *in* the Bible; they believe in the living God attested *by* the Bible. Scripture is indispensable for bringing us into a new relationship with the living God through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, and thus into new relationship with others and with the entire creation. To speak of the authority of the Bible rightly is to speak of its power by God’s Spirit to help create, nourish, and reform this new life in relationship with God and others.²¹⁸

As such, all talk of “canon” must take into account this purpose—because this purpose is what gave rise to the canon. The Bible’s table of contents, like its text, is not simply a fixed and divinely decreed code of zeros (out) and ones (in). Like Guthrie, Migliore says the narratives of Scripture are “still open”²¹⁹ because God continues the work of the Spirit beyond “Bible times.” This also means interpreting Scripture as “the unique and normative witness to God’s self-revelation

214 Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 47.

215 Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 50.

216 Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 50.

217 Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 51.

218 Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 52.

219 Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 56

given above all in Jesus Christ are skills learned and strengthened by participation in the life of the Christian community.”²²⁰

This bibliology—virtually opposite of the Confessional Reformed and Calvinist Baptists—is said to be distinctively Reformed by many others. Consider, for example, the following statements:

The reformed tradition typically resists making fundamentalist arguments about biblical truth and its application to modern society.²²¹

The Reformed theologian’s appeal to the Word of God as the criterion for reform in no way entails uncritical acceptance of the words of the Bible as the Word of God. . . . Sometimes the words of the Bible themselves need to be criticized or even rejected. . . . The word is never enclosed within the words in such a way that it could be a human possession. Quoting Bible passages as “proofs” in theological arguments may not, and often does not, have anything at all to do with the Word of God.²²²

Bibliology According to the Reformers

The bibliology of Luther and Calvin was born out their contemporary debates with the Roman Catholic Church. As such, their use and understanding of the Bible centered on such themes as biblical authority and adequacy (against the traditions of proclamations of the Roman church), and subthemes like the authority and adequacy of certain biblical books (against the official canon of the Roman church). This project of re-building theology and re-centering the church also therefore involved a hermeneutical revolution partially influenced by early modern and rationalist thought but also driven by earlier theological traditions. This leads to some unique situations. For example, Calvin practiced textual criticism in writing his commentaries, and Luther criticized Erasmus’s new Greek New Testament because of its readings and textual choices. Both were more skeptical of allegorical readings than their patristic and medieval predecessors and more confident in using the Bible in proof-texting wars with their opponents. An icon of this situation was Luther’s trial before the Diet of Worms in 1531, where he refused to back down and concede to Rome “unless it can be proven by Scripture,” because his conscience was “held captive to the Word of God.” With the future

220 Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 61.

221 Rebecca Blank, “A Christian Perspective on the Role of Government in the Market Economy,” in *Global Neighbors: Christian Faith and Moral Obligation in Today’s Economy*, ed. Douglas Hicks and Mark Valeri (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 241.

222 Dawn DeVries, “Ever to be Reformed According to the Word of God,” in *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 57.

of the European church in the balance, the text and books of the Bible mattered more than ever before.

The Confessional Reformed (among others) have not infrequently attempted to read back the details of their contemporary bibliology into the minds and words of Calvin and Luther.²²³ Whether or not Donald McKim and Jack Rogers overstated their case in arguing the contrary,²²⁴ there is no question that Luther and Calvin believed in something closely approximating “verbal-plenary inspiration” and some sense of “infallibility”; had reservations about a canon larger than the current Protestant consensus; held to a “self-authenticating” bibliology²²⁵; and yet they were not card-carrying, twentieth-century conservative Presbyterians.²²⁶

Scholars of reformed thought have long-noted the influence of Calvin’s academic background and Aristotelian inclinations—not to mention his Bavinck-like paradoxical and contradictory perspective. In commenting on 2 Tim 3:16, Calvin speaks about scriptural “doctrine . . . dictated by the Holy Spirit.”²²⁷ The Old Princetonian B. B. Warfield explained this puzzling metaphor as follows: “What Calvin has in mind, is, not to insist that the mode of inspiration was dictation, but that the result of inspiration is as if it were by dictation, viz., the production of a pure word of God free from all human admixtures.”²²⁸ In that case, Calvin’s view would not be different from the Confessional Reformed: the Bible did not fall out of heaven and was not dictated, *but it should be treated as if it was*.²²⁹ However, John McNeill (editor of Calvin’s *Institutes*) argued that “it is not said [by Calvin] that the Scripture is verbally dictated; the point is simply that its teaching

223 E.g., J. I. Packer, “John Calvin and the Inerrancy of Holy Scripture,” in *Inerrancy and the Church*, ed. John Hannah (Chicago: Moody, 1984); Matthew Barret, *God’s Word Alone: The Authority of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016); Robert Godfrey, “Biblical Authority in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: A Question of Transition,” in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992 [1983]), 232–33; Gaffin, *God’s Word in Servant-Form*.

224 Jack Rogers and Donald McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979).

225 E.g., “Scripture indeed is self-authenticated; hence, it is not right to subject it to proof and reasoning.” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960, orig. 1559), 1.6.5.

226 This topic surrounds dozens of sources, which were summarized in an annotated bibliography by Roger Nicole, “John Calvin and Inerrancy,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25 (1982): 425–42. My discussion here is an extremely condensed narrative of this debate. My complaint with Nicole’s assessment is the same for any inerrantist: there is an assumption that the doctrine of inerrancy is theoretically coherent, when it is not. See Hübner, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism*.

227 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1856), 219.

228 Benjamin B. Warfield, “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Knowledge of God,” in *Calvin and Calvinism*, ed. Benjamin B. Warfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1931), 63.

229 Cf. “It has flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men” (*Institutes*, 1.6.5).

(*doctrina*) is not of men but of God.”²³⁰ In that case, which seems to cohere with Calvin’s general view of Scripture, the message of Scripture is the point, and the words/text is “inspired” and “truthful” to the extent that it gives rise to that content.

The same goes for Calvin’s view of Scripture in general—which is similar to both Luther’s and Kuyper’s view: God is the author of the Bible²³¹ and is meant to “make himself known unto salvation,”²³² but Scripture is only the “word” of life when showing forth Christ.²³³ The text of the Bible is not simply God’s Word in and of itself but is such when the Holy Spirit illumines the mind. The living word is dead without illumination.

Things get further complicated in Calvin’s doctrine of “accommodation.” He said, “For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to ‘lisp’ in speaking to us? Thus, such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity.”²³⁴ This allowed Calvin to make remarks that no Confessional Reformed person would have made a century later. For example, he says the author of Genesis “certainly, in the first chapter . . . did not treat scientifically of the stars, as a philosopher would do; but he called them, in a popular manner, according to their appearance to the uneducated, rather than according to truth, ‘two great lights.’”²³⁵ There is obviously no “rather than according to truth” for the contemporary Confessional Reformed or Calvinist Baptist.

Placher notes that the shift in bibliology from the reformers to the seventeenth century can be traced to new priorities and how, despite “the noetic effects of sin,” reformed theologians had a remarkable optimism about the human mind’s ability to prove the truth of biblical revelation. At first, publications like the *Institutes* and Augsburg Confession began with a discussion about God and the Trinity and then moved on to Scripture, or only addressed it in passing (cf. Nicene Creed). This changed with the *WCF*, which began with a centralized discussion on the Bible.

“Of God, and of the Holy Trinity” comes in chapter 2. In chapter 1, “the Word of God” consistently refers to the Bible, not to Christ. Much seventeenth-century theology, in both Lutheran and Reformed traditions, likewise discussed scripture first and then the Triune God. One

230 John T. McNeill, “The Significance of the Word of God for Calvin,” *Church History* 28 (1959): 141.

231 *Institutes* 1.3.4.

232 *Institutes* 1.6.1.

233 *Institutes* 1.9.3.

234 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.1.

235 Calvin, Commentary on Gen 6:14.

consequence was a change in the basis of scriptural authority. For Calvin, “those who wish to prove to unbelievers that Scripture is the Word of God are acting foolishly,” since “Scripture will ultimately suffice for a saving knowledge of God only when its certainty is founded upon the inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit.” A seventeenth-century Reformed theologians like Francis Turretin, on the other hand, could review the antiquity of the biblical texts, their accurate preservation, the candor of their writers in admitting their own faults, the majesty of their style, the harmony of their doctrine, and so on, and conclude, “The Bible . . . proves itself divine ratiocinatively by an argument artfully made from the indubitable proofs of divinity.” No need then for the Spirit’s illumination to establish scripture’s authority. . . . While such theologians thought of themselves as defending biblical authority in the face of a rising tide of rationalism, they were in their own way rationalists. Human reason, Turretin insisted, could figure out the Bible’s authority.²³⁶

Calvin’s view of the canon was also not as “reformed” as one would have imagined. Presumably because of the canonical uncertainty in the first two centuries of the church (or just because he did not value these books as highly as others), Calvin wrote commentaries on all the biblical books except 2–3 John, and Revelation. His use and views of Baruch also suggest a canon with blurred edges—at least from a practical point of view.²³⁷

Luther (like the original King James Bible) included the “apocryphal books” in his original German Bible though said they were “not equal to the Holy Scriptures.”²³⁸ In fact, Luther considered Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation non-canonical, so the Lutheran German Bible ordered them last. On James in particular, Luther said at one point, “I . . . regard it as valuable although it was rejected in early days. It does not expound human doctrines, but lays much emphasis on God’s law. . . . I do not hold it to be of apostolic authorship. . . . In the whole length of its teaching, not once does it give Christians any instruction or reminder of the passion, resurrection, or spirit of Christ.”²³⁹ He also considered excluding Esther from the Old Testament.²⁴⁰ These attitudes are noticeably different from the

236 William Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking About God Went Wrong* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 168–69.

237 Calvin, Commentary on 1 Cor 10:20.

238 Quoted in William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1976), 7.

239 Martin Luther, “Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude,” in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor, 1962), 35.

240 Were he alive today, he would have found great support for this position since Esther is excluded entirely from the Dead Sea Scrolls (while the DSS include multiple copies of “apocryphal” works).

stark claims of the *WCF*, which (in 1.3) lists the books that are canonical and says the apocrypha “are no part of the canon of the Scripture, and therefore are of no authority in the church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writing.”

Under the sway of Enlightenment rationalism (which has its roots in earlier Greek thought), *WCF* came to see the Bible not just as divine, but as a work of total perfection:

And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man’s salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God. (*WCF* 1.5)

Luther disagreed with this sentiment. In fact, he explicitly argued the opposite—as if anticipating how some of his followers might go overboard with *sola scriptura*: “Holy Scripture possesses no external glory, attracts no attention, lacks all beauty and adornment. You can scarcely imagine that anyone would attach faith to such a divine Word, because it is without any glory or charm. Yet faith comes from this divine Word, through its inner power without any external loveliness.”²⁴¹ Contradictions like these—which are embedded in a confident rhetoric of certainty—vividly illustrate just how thick a reformed theologian’s lens can be with regard to the sacred book.

At any rate, it is not surprising that Luther also maintains all of the features of the Neocalvinists: the incarnational analogy (“Just as it is with Christ in the world, as he is viewed and dealt with, so it is also the written Word of God”),²⁴² self-authentication, having primarily a saving function, and illumination by the Spirit.²⁴³

Reflections and Conclusions

This article has looked at only one case study to demonstrate how five streams of reformed theology handle a particular topic. The results are wide and varied. Subjects on the periphery illustrate even more discontinuity.

Consider, for example, the doctrine of creation. The Confessional Reformed and Calvinist Baptists generally affirm: (a) a literal reading of Genesis²⁴⁴; (b)

241 Cited in Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*, 78.

242 Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*, 78.

243 See references in Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*, 79; and Martin Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms* (on Ps 54:1), trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 10 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1974), 212.

244 Sproul, *Everyone’s a Theologian*, 99; MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 215–16; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 265–88.

creationism,²⁴⁵ including Young-Earth Creationism²⁴⁶; and (c) a historical Adam and Eve as the first progenitors of humankind²⁴⁷; (d) reject common descent and the general theory of evolution²⁴⁸; and (e) see “natural” explanations as in competition with God’s “supernatural” acts of creation instead of in harmony with them (but *not* for non-creative or non-“special” work of God).²⁴⁹ Kuyper and Bavinck are mostly on the same page (though less so on [e]) and gave lengthy arguments against the new theory of evolution,²⁵⁰ though most Neocalvinist pastors and professors today are evolutionary creationists.²⁵¹ The Progressive Reformed assume the evolutionary consensus.²⁵² Calvin and Luther do not exactly fit any of these categories. Their criticism of geocentrism might lead one to think they would have rejected evolution. But their understanding of God’s agency and action within the “natural world” does not fit the creationist or Intelligent Design model.²⁵³

Another example is anthropology and gender. As already noted earlier, the Confessional Reformed and Calvinist Baptists fervently hold to female subordinationism (i.e., patriarchalism).²⁵⁴ The Neocalvinists are varied throughout the last century. Kuyper was largely misogynist and criticized female suffrage.²⁵⁵ His

245 Sproul, *Everyone’s a Theologian*, 99; MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 215–16; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 265–88; as well as Chad Owen Brand, “The Work of God: Creation and Providence,” in *A Theology for the Church*, 235–37.

246 Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 392–96; John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), 291; Brand, *A Theology for the Church*, 225–27.

247 Sproul, *Everyone’s a Theologian*, 114–15; MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 405–407; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 265–88; Brand, *A Theology for the Church*, 226; John S. Hammett, “Human Nature,” in *A Theology for the Church*, 287.

248 Sproul says evolution “is unmitigated nonsense and will be totally rejected by the secular scientific community within the next generation. . . . Macroevolution is one of the most unsubstantiated myths that I’ve ever seen perpetuated in an academic environment” (R. C. Sproul, *Now That’s a Good Question!* [Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 1996], 98). Cf. MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 215–17; 405–47; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 265–88; Brand, *A Theology for the Church*, 225–27; Hammett, *A Theology for the Church*, 287.

249 Sproul, *Everyone’s a Theologian*, 209ff; Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 409–11; MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 215–18; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, chs. 15–17; Brand, *A Theology for the Church*, 225–27.

250 Kuyper’s rectorial address “Evolution” (1899) argued that “the Christian religion and the theory of evolution are two mutually exclusive systems.” See James Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 412ff. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, chs. 10–11, argues much the same, regarding the age of humanity, for example, that “there is no significant disagreement between Scripture and science” (1:523).

251 Plantinga, Thompson, and Lundberg, *Christian Theology*, 160–63. Note the significant number of faculty involved in the American Scientific Affiliation and BioLogos from Neocalvinist schools. CRC and RCA churches have also sponsored lectures and seminars on making the transition from a creationist to an evolutionary creation perspective. The Progressive Reformed obviously don’t have this type of baggage to deal with.

252 Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, 151; Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 117–22.

253 See Hübner, “The Progress (or Extinction?) of Modern Creationism.”

254 The literature is too vast to include in this footnote.

255 Abraham Kuyper, *De Eerepositie der Vrouw* (“The Woman’s Position of Honor”), trans. Irene Konyndyk (Kampen: Kok, 1932), 7, 19–28: “[T]he feminine nature, which glittering in her inner

protégé Bavinck initially rejected suffrage but then affirmed it.²⁵⁶ Bavinck's publications demonstrate his evolution on the topic of gender in general.²⁵⁷ Most importantly, he showed a general consciousness of patriarchy as a historical phase that was beginning to fading away: "His statement became famous in Christian circles: 'The soul of the woman has awoken and no power in this world will bring it back to its former state of unconsciousness.'"²⁵⁸ Neocalvinists today, with the Progressive Reformed, follow Bavinck's trajectory by rejecting female subordinationism and proactively countering the effects of patriarchy.²⁵⁹

One finds the same result on virtually any other topic—church/state relations, the reasons for the sacraments,²⁶⁰ church governing structures, eschatology, and

emotional richness, will tolerate no supremacy of the intellect. . . . The private and public life form two separate spheres, each with their own way of existing, with their own task. . . . And it is on the basis of this state of affairs, which has not been invented by us, but which God himself has imposed on us, that in public life the woman does not stand equally with the man. Nor more that it can be said of the man that he has been called to achieve in the family that which is achieved by the woman. . . . For which the man is the appointed worker [the public domain], she will never be able to fulfill anything but a subordinate role, in which her inferiority would soon come to light anyway." Cf. Kuyper, "Uniformity," in *Reader*, 29: "In our country, prophetesses have arisen who insist—as though they were part of an antislavery league—on the emancipation of women and demand that they too be entitled to wear a liberty cap on their heads. In modern America a woman has recently taken a professor's chair at one of the colleges. . . . In Germany and Belgium women's skirts swirl around office stools."

256 "For a large part of his political career . . . Bavinck fought against suffrage and was against women having the right to vote (instead, Bavinck, typical of the Anti-Revolutionary Party, believed in suffrage being granted to fathers as the heads of families, with those families voting as units). His opinion later changed, eventually leading him to vote for individual male and female suffrage, despite being opposed to Revolutionary individualism in principle." James Eglinton in Herman Bavinck, *The Christian Family*, ed. Stephen Grabill, trans. Nelson Kloosterman (Grand Rapids: Christian's Library, 212), location 168 (Kindle).

257 E.g., on speaking about Eve, Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, trans. Henry Zylstra, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 189–90: "She is out of Adam and yet is another than Adam. She is related to him and yet is different from him. She belongs to the same kind and yet in that kind she occupies her own unique position. She is dependent and yet she is free. She is *after* Adam and *out of* Adam, but owes her existence to God alone. . . . She is his helper, not as mistress and much less as slave, but as an individual, independent, and free being, who receives her existence not from the man but from God, who is responsible to God, and who was added to man as a free and unearned gift." Furthermore, when Bavinck spoke of marriage, it was primarily for companionship, not procreation or for the male person's higher "good."

258 Neils Van Driel, "The Status of Women in Contemporary Society: Principles and Practice in Herman Bavinck's Socio-Political Thought," in *Five Studies in the Thought of Bavinck, A Creator of Modern Dutch Theology*, ed. John Bolt (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2011), 153–95.

259 E.g., Plantinga, Thompson, and Lundberg, *Christian Theology*, 200–201. All Neocalvinist and Progressive Reformed denominations support women ordination. The acceptance (both in membership and ordination) of QUILTBAG persons is currently being debated, with many Neocalvinists affirming, others not.

260 For example, the average PCA minister today will baptize infants "because they are in the covenant" or as "a sign of the covenant of grace," while Calvin's logic was baptizing them "into future repentance and faith" (*Institutes*, 4.16.20), a concept I've never heard promoted by a contemporary Presbyterian, conservative or mainstream. W. Gary Crampton, *From Paedobaptism to Credobaptism: A Critique of the Westminster Standards on the Subjects of Baptism* (Owensboro: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2010) compellingly argues that infant baptism directly violates the "regulative principle of worship." Alan Conner, *Covenant Children Today: Physical or*

other loci of systematics.²⁶¹ Different degrees of the *Semper Reformanda* (“always reforming”) spirit undoubtedly led to this incredible diversity. “Thus, over the centuries, we have challenged pretension at every point in church and society—even in our own classic heritage. That led most Protestants to read the Bible in critical ways, and to be very cautious about *sola Scriptura*. The debate over this issue is what divides Protestants from those who have taken the tradition toward Fundamentalism.”²⁶²

It is almost as if diversity is what characterizes Reformed theology more than anything. So whatever “confessionalism” there is, it must necessarily be plural.

An insistent focus on “essential” Reformed tenets may, in the end, result in a rather idiosyncratic understanding of the tradition, one that becomes rather distant from other bodies of the Christian family. An appeal to essential tenets may even violate the intents of the Reformers. The early proliferation of Reformed confessions points to an essential distrust of any one confession as being binding and authoritative for all time. At the signing of the First Helvetic Confession, Heinrich Bullinger claimed, “We wish in no way to prescribe for all churches through these articles a single rule of faith. For we acknowledge no other rule of faith than Holy Scripture.” There is something about the dynamic of Reformed Christianity itself that demands multiple confessions. Instead of essential tenets, pluralism may constitute one of the “essential” features of Reformed Christianity.²⁶³

In glancing at the rear-view mirror, we indeed see that the varieties of Reformed thought can be categorized according to their willingness to reform. One might sketch this interpretation of history as follows.

The reformers themselves reformed only (or at least primarily) because their minds and consciences were “miserably vexed and flayed” (Luther at Diet of Worms) and were forced to do something. Doing something, they knew things would never be the same but did not fully comprehend what all this meant. Their

Spiritual? (Owensboro: RBAP, 2007), also consistently argues that “covenant children” are spiritual children in the Gospels and New Testament message, not biological. Additionally, Richard Barcellos, ed., *Recovering a Covenantal Heritage* (Palmdale: RBAP, 2014), demonstrates that covenant theology lends more support to credobaptism than paedobaptism. Because Presbyterians maintain a majority over Reformed Baptists, and because Reformed Baptists do not have a positive academic reputation, such Presbyterians have not needed to engage these arguments. Nevertheless, Migliore and many other PCUSA figures realize the problems of paedobaptism and tend to “permit it” more than “promote it.”

261 Crisp, *Saving Calvinism and Deviant Calvinism*, include a number of other such examples, including universalism and particularism in soteriology.

262 Max Stackhouse et al., *Christian Social Ethics in a Global Era* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 20.

263 David Jensen, ed., *Always Being Reformed: Challenges and Prospects for the Future of Reformed Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 5.

experience was initially one of persecution and escape from Roman authoritarianism. The experience of later generations of European reformers was one of laying new foundations via national identities and “getting doctrine right” once and for all. But in codifying their lengthy creeds and confessions into the dogmatic law of state-churches, they turned *Semper Reformanda* into *Never Reformanda*, and never really cleansed themselves of Rome’s authoritarianism, conquer-and-colonize spirit, and incredulous claims of doctrinal finality. They had no intention of changing their theology in the near future and made (notorious) efforts to prevent it. The Neocalvinists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw how *Never Reformanda* worked out in the deaths of tens of thousands in the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and wisely retreated back to the spirit of the reformers. However, they were not under the gun of Rome anymore; they were under the “gun” of a world turned upside down by modern, rapid change—Industrialism, Darwinism, higher criticism, democratic nation-states, secularization, and various Enlightenment projects on steroids. With one foot in the Reformation and another foot in a brave new world of mass-produced study Bibles and bottled shaving cream, they did their best to erect provisional constructs of theological understanding and social ethics for their churches and communities, knowing that they too would inevitably change. The (proto-) Progressive Reformed continued the trajectory of the Neocalvinists, interbreeding with Protestant liberalism and postmodern thought in varying degrees to produce all the diversity that now exists within that stream. With the accelerated collapse of denominations and institutional Christianity in the West at large, and with continued splitting of reformed denominations into ever thinner subsets, Reformed thought appears to have fully flowered. It will still be some time, however, before Reformed Theology and its communities shrivel to the status of the Amish—if they ever will. (Arians, Arminians, and Nestorians still gather for worship in various places around the globe.)

Despite various internal arguments (and my own biases against the Confessional Reformed and Calvinist Baptists), all streams have something meaningful to contribute. In my assessment, for the reformers it is a bravery of conscience and determination that refuses to collapse under the weight of spiritual and social tyranny. The Confessional Reformed, an exercise and experiment of pushing the intellect to comprehend the incomprehensible, and taking seriously self-discipline and challenging standards of holiness. The Calvinist Baptists, the importance of conviction and cultural witness. The Neocalvinists, a grand cosmic and creative vision to see strange and unfamiliar sectors of creation—with all the rest—as part of a divine drama. The Progressive Reformed, a humility and bravery in listening to the voice of God in all of creation, and letting the future change the present instead of courting the past to needlessly haunt the present.

All streams also have blind spots. For the reformers, they missed that Christianity is bigger than European institutional churches, and that the Bible can never provide the kind of unity and results we often want and expect from it. Similarly, the Confessional Reformed fail to see that theology and doctrine are time-bound, language-bound constructs of the human mind and, as such, must never be enforced with any significant degree of organized authority—much less coercion. The Calvinist Baptists neglect that true power is not captured through baptisms or church planting or in the establishment of “Christian” civil laws or political officers. The Neocalvinists miss the fact that the divine drama—which began before our species—simply cannot be encapsulated into a biblical creation-fall-redemption, nor can all of life’s experience be categorized as “unredeemed” and “redeemed.” Finally, the Progressive Reformed need reminding that we must always cautiously discern what the winds of the Spirit really are (especially in conjunction with past and current models), and (in extreme cases), need reminding that to stand for everything is to stand for nothing.