



RECOVERING THE REFORMED CONFESSION



Our Theology, Piety, and Practice



R. SCOTT CLARK

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REFORMED
CONFESSION

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R. SCOTT CLARK



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*To Bob,
a confessional churchman,*

and

*to Darryl,
who says what I would think
if I had thought of it*

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Abbreviations

6/24	Six-day, twenty-four-hour (creation)
BC	Belgic Confession
BCO	Book of Church Order
BCP	Book of Common Prayer
BHS	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i> . Edited by A. Alt, O. Eissfeldt, P. Kahle. 5th ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997.
CD	Canons of Dort
CO	John Calvin. <i>Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia</i> . Edited by A. E. Cunitz et al. 59 vols. <i>Corpus Reformatorum</i> . Brunswick: C. A. Schwetschke and Sons, 1863–1900.
CR	<i>Corpus Reformatorum</i> . Edited by C. G. Bretschneider. 101 vols. Halle, 1834–1959.
CRC	Christian Reformed Church
CRCNA	Christian Reformed Churches in North America
<i>Creeds</i>	<i>The Creeds of Christendom</i> . Edited by Phillip Schaff. 3 vols. Grand Rapids: Baker, reprint 1983.
CTJ	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
DPW	<i>A Directory for Publique Prayer, Reading the Holy Scriptures, Singing of Psalmes, Preaching of the Word, Administration of the Sacraments, and Other Parts of the Publique Worship of God, Ordinary and Extraordinary</i> . London, 1645.

Abbreviations

EPC	Evangelical Presbyterian Church
ESV	English Standard Version
HC	Heidelberg Catechism
<i>Institutes</i>	John Calvin. <i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i> . Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. 2 vols. Library of Christian Classics 20–21. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960.
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
KJV	King James Version
LW	Martin Luther. <i>Luther's Works</i> . Edited by J. Pelikan. 55 vols. St. Louis: Concordia, 1958–.
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NAPARC	North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council
Niemeyer	H. A. Niemeyer. <i>Collectio Confessionum in Ecclesiis Reformatis Publicatarum</i> . Leipzig: Julius Klinkhardt, 1840.
NIV	New International Version
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i> . Edited by J. A. Simpson and Edmund Weiner. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
OPC	Orthodox Presbyterian Church
OS	John Calvin. <i>Joannis Calvinii Opera Selecta</i> . Edited by Petrus Barth and W. Niesel. 5 vols. 3rd ed. Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1963–74.
PCA	Presbyterian Church in America
PCUSA	Presbyterian Church USA
PRRD	Richard A. Muller. <i>Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy</i> ,

ca. 1520 to ca. 1725, 2d ed., 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003.

RCA	Reformed Church in America
RCH	<i>Reformed Confessions Harmonized with an Annotated Bibliography of Reformed Doctrinal Works</i> . Edited by Joel R. Beeke and Sinclair B. Ferguson. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999.
RCUS	Reformed Church in the United States
RPCNA	Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America
RPW	Regulative Principle of Worship
ST	Thomas Aquinas. <i>Summa Theologiae</i> . Edited by Thomas Gilby. 61 vols. London and New York: Blackfriars and McGraw-Hill, 1964–80.
UCC	United Church of Christ
URCNA	United Reformed Churches in North America
WA	Martin Luther. <i>Luthers Werke Kritische Gesamtausgabe</i> . Edited by J. K. F. Knaake and G. Kawerau et al. Weimar: H. H. Böhlau, 1883–.
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
WLC	Westminster Larger Catechism
<i>Works</i>	<i>The Works of Jonathan Edwards</i> . Edited by Perry Miller et al. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957.
WSC	Westminster Shorter Catechism
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>



This doctrine the Synod judges to be drawn from the Word of God, and to be agreeable to the confession of the Reformed Churches.

... Wherefore, this Synod of Dort, in the name of the Lord, conjures as many as piously call upon the name of our Savior Jesus Christ to judge of the faith of the Reformed Churches, not from the calumnies which on every side are heaped upon it, nor from the private expressions of a few among ancient and modern teachers, often dishonestly quoted, or corrupted and wrested to a meaning quite foreign to their intention; but from the public confessions of the Churches themselves, and from this declaration of the orthodox doctrine, confirmed by the unanimous consent of all and each of the members of the whole Synod.

—CONCLUSION TO THE CANONS OF DORT

Fear of scholasticism is the mark of a false prophet.

—KARL BARTH



CHAPTER I



Whatever Became of Reformed Theology, Piety, and Practice?

This book is intended for those who identify with the Reformed branch of the Reformation. Readers from other traditions, however, may find it useful for clarifying their own identity, or perhaps they will decide that they like our confession and wish to join us. This book is not for those who think that all is well in the Reformed and Presbyterian churches in North America, because it is designed to provoke discontent and change, specifically reformation according to God's Word as confessed by the Reformed churches. If, however, you have an ill-defined sense that something is wrong with our churches but have trouble identifying what it is, this book is for you.

The Reformed and Presbyterian churches in North America belong to three great categories, the *mainline*, the *borderline*, and the *sideline*. The mainline Reformed (e.g., the Presbyterian Church USA, the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ) shuttled significant elements of the historic Reformed confession (theology, piety, and practice) through the twentieth century.¹ The borderline denominations, for

1. The mainline denominations are represented in organizations such as the National Council of Churches and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. On the rise of modernism and its consequences for the Presbyterian and Reformed mainline see Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists and Moderates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of*

example, the Christian Reformed Churches in North America (CRCNA) and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) are in transition but they are moving in opposite directions.² While the CRCNA seems to be moving (via broad evangelicalism) toward the mainline,³ the EPC, founded by those leaving the mainline, appears to be moving in the opposite direction. The North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) represents the sideline denominations.⁴ This volume is relevant to all three segments of the Reformed churches but is aimed particularly at pastors, elders, and theology students in the borderline and sideline denominations. To those in the borderline who are moving away from the Reformed confessions, I hope to give some reason for reconsidering that journey. To those who are in the process of embracing the confessional vision of theology, piety, and practice, I hope to give reasons for carrying on. To those in the sideline, from where this book is written, I am issuing a warning that we are not as different from the mainline and borderline churches as we sometimes like to imagine.

Conservative Protestantism in Modern America (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995); idem, *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002); Lefferts A. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church: A Study of Theological Issues in the Presbyterian Church since 1869* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1954). Like the PCUSA, the RCA is a member of both the National Council and World Council of Churches.

2. One counterargument to this taxonomy is the fact that the CRCNA, EPC, the PCUSA, and the UCC are all members of the mainline World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC). See http://www.warc.ch/list/church_list.html (accessed 1 September 2007).

3. There is strong evidence for the claim that the CRCNA is a borderline denomination. Despite strong opposition, Classis Kalamazoo (1995) set aside elements of the church order to permit the ordination of females to pastoral office. Since that time the denomination has lost tens of thousands of members so that there were celebrations when decline leveled off. In recognition of the trajectory of the CRCNA, the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council, composed of confessional denominations, excluded the CRCNA in 2002. Classis Grand Rapids East (2006) agreed to bracket sections of the Heidelberg Catechism (HC) Q. 80 as inaccurate and unecumenical. News reports from Synods 2006 and 2007 read like reports from any mainline Presbyterian General Assembly from the 1960s. On the gradual "Americanization" of the CRCNA see James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

4. North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council, "Constitution of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council" (as amended by the Third and Twenty-Second Meetings of the Council, 28–29 October 1977), <http://traver.org/napar2/cb.htm> (accessed 26 March 2007).

Themes, Vocabulary, and Structure

This is a book about recovery, by which I mean to say that we have lost something that we can and must apprehend again: what we confess, that is, our theology, piety, and practice. I shall use the word “Reformed” mainly to denote the theology, piety, and practice of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches, not as a proper name of any particular denomination or federation. One of the major questions to be pursued is the relation between the word “Reformed” and the thing itself. Is the word “Reformed” merely a convention, a way of speaking, or does it have an objective referent? I contend that the word denotes a confession, a theology, piety, and practice that are well known and well defined and summarized in ecclesiastically sanctioned and binding documents.

By “confession,” I mean narrowly the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed confessions, which we might call the six forms of unity (i.e., Belgic Confession [BC], HC, Canons of Dort [CD], Westminster Confession of Faith [WCF], Westminster Larger Catechism [WLC], and Westminster Shorter Catechism [WSC]). So the first sense of the word is “ecclesiastical dogma.” Second, and more broadly, however, I mean the understanding of those confessions as articulated by the classical sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed theologians and by those who continued that tradition, the outlines of which are evident to anyone who reads Calvin, Ursinus, Wollebius, Owen, Turretin, Witsius, Hodge, Bavinck, and Berkhof. Third, by “confession” I mean the theology, piety, and practice agreed upon by our churches, held in common by them, which bind us together, by which we have covenanted to live and worship together. So that, as used in this work, “confession” is a rich, multilayered term that has both fixed and developing aspects (*ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*). In good Reformed fashion, this book has two grammatical moods: imperative and indicative.⁵ First, we shall consider, as it were, the law. Second, we shall consider the good news, as it were, about being Reformed and some paths to recovery.

5. For more on law and gospel as Reformed categories see R. Scott Clark, “Letter and Spirit: Law and Gospel in Reformed Preaching,” in *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry: Essays by the Faculty of Westminster Seminary California*, ed. R. Scott Clark (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006), 331–63.

Much of what passes as Reformed among our churches is not. Its sources, spirit, and methods are alien to Reformed theology, piety, and practice. There are significant segments within the Reformed communion that define “Reformed” in ways that our forefathers would not understand. For example, some define the Reformed identity according to one’s view of the length of the creation days. Others define it according to one’s view of the postcanonical application of Mosaic civil laws, and still others speak as if the Reformed confessions were ambiguous about covenant theology and the doctrine of justification. Practically, we have become fragmented. In our age, it seems that every definition of “Reformed” is regarded as valid and none is definitive. Consider the effect of such fragmentation when looking for a Reformed congregation. One shall have to choose between the “contemporary,” “emerging,” “traditional,” “theonomic,” “federal-vision,” “psalm-singing,” “neo-puritan,” and “confessional” congregations to name but a few possibilities. In nearly every case, the adjective “confessional” is not sufficient to describe accurately the theology, piety, and practice of a given congregation. It is not that there are no ordinary Reformed churches about which one could say “confessional” without qualification, but such do seem to be in the minority. Rather than being the single common denominator among Reformed congregations, “confessional” has become simply one adjective among many. How can that be? Have not all Reformed ministers and elders subscribed a Reformed confession before God and his church, swearing to uphold, teach, and defend the same? If so, are we not all morally obligated to be confessional; if we are not, how did this happen?

It is the argument of this book that the Reformed confession is the only reasonable basis for a stable definition of the Reformed theology, piety, and practice. As a class of churches that profess allegiance to the Reformed theology, piety, and practice as revealed in God’s Word and summarized in the Reformed confessions, we have drifted from our moorings. Some of us have become confused about what it is to be Reformed, while others of us have lost confidence altogether that Reformed theology, piety, and practice are even correct.

The Quest for a Redefinition of Reformed

In 1844, upon being made professor in the seminary of the Reformed Churches in the United States, Phillip Schaff gave his inaugural address

that was translated by his colleague John Williamson Nevin and published the next year as *The Principle of Protestantism*.⁶ He argued that American religion was infected with two diseases:⁷ “Rationalism and sectarianism then are the most dangerous enemies of our church at the present time. They are both but different sides of the one and the same principle—a one-sided false subjectivity, sundered from the authority of the objective. Rationalism is theoretic sectarianism; sectarianism is practical rationalism.”⁸ In the century and a half since Schaff issued this warning these two diseases have continued to afflict the Reformed churches.

What Schaff called rationalism we will call the Quest for Illegitimate Religious Certainty or QIRC, that is, the quest to know what God knows, the way he knows it. This quest often manifests itself in the attempt to find certainty on issues that are not of the *esse* (being) or even of the *bene esse* (well-being) of the Reformed confession. For those on this quest, what matters more than finding the truth or getting it right is *being* right. According to QIRC, there is no distinction between essential and nonessential doctrines or practices, since QIRC renders them all equally important. What Schaff called “sectarianism” may also be described as the Quest for Illegitimate Religious Experience or QIRE. This is the pursuit of the immediate experience of God without the means of grace (i.e., the preaching of the gospel and the sacraments). It is the attempt to experience him in a way that he has not ordained, and more specifically, to experience him in a way that we do not confess. The first half of this work sketches the nature of the QIRC and QIRE, offers examples of both in the Reformed churches, and finally offers criticisms of both.

Tradition, *Sola Scriptura*, and *Semper Reformanda*

As the baby-boomer generation came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, it led a broad cultural and religious reaction to traditionalism in various

6. Phillip Schaff, *The Principle of Protestantism*, ed. Bard Thompson and George H. Bricker, trans. John W. Nevin, Lancaster Series on the Mercersburg Theology (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1964).

7. *Ibid.*, 129–55.

8. *Ibid.*, 155.

spheres. This is the era that brought us Woodstock and post-Vatican II guitar masses. The evangelical version of the guitar mass is the Scripture chorus. Today, however, some of the children and grandchildren of the boomers are conducting their own social and liturgical revolution: they are looking to the past. Journalist Colleen Carroll documents a significant movement by young adults (born 1965–83) toward traditional worship and piety.⁹ She notes that, in recent years, in the midst of a growing pluralism, having tried everything that secularism has to offer, many so-called Gen-Xers have already had their midlife crisis. They have seen that the writer of Ecclesiastes was fundamentally correct, that “all is vanity” (Eccl. 1:1–11). Repenting of the fast lane, they are turning to various forms of religious traditionalism (Roman and Protestant). Though some are following the boomer pattern of contemporary worship services, a remarkable number of postboomers are demanding preaching and worship that are substantial, confessional, and mysterious.¹⁰ Renewed interest in the past is also manifesting itself in the emerging and emergent church movements and especially in their eclectic use of the past. According to Randall Balmer and Lauren Winner, the trend toward contemporary worship has competition.

Many Protestant congregations, even those with decidedly low-church pedigrees, are also appropriating liturgy in their worship. In so doing, they not only connect with historic creeds and traditions, they attract a new generation of churchgoers, many of whom have grown weary of the contemporary worship styles that dominate the baby-boomer megachurches.¹¹

9. Colleen Carroll, *The New Faithful: Why Young Adults Are Embracing Christian Orthodoxy* (Chicago: Loyola, 2002). See also Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 77–80. Christian Smith, however, paints a less optimistic picture of the spiritual state of American teenagers. See Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Though American teenagers are interested in spiritual things, they are inarticulate about the faith largely because their congregations have refused to teach them anything of substance.

10. One finds a similar approach in Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

11. Randall Balmer and Lauren F. Winner, *Protestantism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 202.

Balmer and Winner attribute this movement among evangelicals to a lessened suspicion of their Roman Catholic neighbors.

For confessional Reformed folk (a category missing from their analysis), however, the use of read prayers and Genevan robes is less the latest novelty and more a return to form.¹² Perhaps then it is a propitious time for Reformed folk to reconsider their past as well, since we also have something of considerable worth to offer to those looking for an alternative to the reigning evangelical paradigms. Our theology, piety, and practice were confessed before us and transmitted to us by others. It is, therefore, a tradition that we have received. Tradition is not simply an extracanonical idea, however, but a biblical concept. In the New Testament “tradition” (*paradosis*) occurs thirteen times. Sometimes it is used negatively, as in Matthew 15:2–6, where Jesus rebukes the Pharisees and the teachers of the law for placing “the traditions of the elders” above the authority of God’s law, thereby effectively circumventing the intent of the law.¹³ Paul likewise referred disparagingly to the “traditions” of his “fathers” in a similar way (Gal. 1:14). He also correlated the “traditions of men” to “vain and deceptive philosophy” and the “basic principles of this world,” and these he juxtaposed to Christ and his gospel (Col. 2:8). In each of these cases, he uses “tradition” to describe a moralistic, self-justifying approach to God in distinction from the Christ-centered gospel of justification and salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

In other places, however, “tradition” is used favorably in the New Testament. The apostle Paul congratulated the Corinthian church for getting at least one thing right: they remembered Paul “in everything” and held to the “traditions” just as he had passed them on to the church (1 Cor. 11:2). In 2 Thessalonians 2:14–15 the apostle even used “tradition” as a synonym for the good news. Scripture says that God efficaciously called the Thessalonian Christians to faith “through our gospel.” It is to this same gospel that Paul refers when he tells them to “stand firm and hold to the traditions we passed on to you” (2 Thess. 2:15). Tradition also refers to Paul’s moral

12. On the omission of confessional Protestants as an analytical category, see Hart, *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism*, xv–xxxiv. Perhaps, because the study of American Protestantism has omitted confessionalism as a historical category, we who should be confessionalists find it difficult to think of ourselves as such since the category is not yet widely used.

13. See F. F. Bruce, *Tradition, Old and New* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1970), 19–28.

teaching. In the same epistle he says, “We command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the tradition you received from us” (2 Thess. 3:6). In this case, the tradition is simple and clear: “For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: ‘If a man will not work, he shall not eat’” (2 Thess. 3:10). In either case, it is clear that Paul was not averse to describing his teaching, whether law or gospel, as a “tradition,” that is, a body of theological or moral instruction that was to be received and considered authoritative and binding. Certainly, for confessional Protestants, there is a sharp distinction to be made between the apostolic tradition and subsequent, postcanonical Christian tradition. Nevertheless, it would seem difficult to reject tradition as unbiblical or even unhelpful, since we get the very notion from Scripture itself.

According to Heiko Oberman, there were two competing understandings of the relations between tradition and Scripture in the premodern church.¹⁴ He described the first approach, the “single exegetical tradition of interpreted Scripture,” as “Tradition I.” The “two-sources theory which allows for extra-biblical oral tradition” he called “Tradition II.”¹⁵ He argued that the Council of Trent represented Tradition II, and the Reformers represented Tradition I.¹⁶ According to Oberman, Luther was no individualist, because “his interpretation of the *sola Scriptura* principle does *not exclude, but includes* a high regard for Tradition I.”¹⁷ In the Reformation, the confessional Protestants adopted a careful approach to tradition. As Oberman noted, this view was not exclusive to Luther but was also expressed in the Second Helvetic Confession (1561): “Wherefore whenever this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers called legitimately, we believe the same Word of God is proclaimed, and received by the faithful” (1.4).¹⁸

14. Heiko A. Oberman, “Quo Vadis, Petre? Tradition from Irenaeus to *Humani Generis*,” in *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992).

15. *Ibid.*, 280. John E. Thiel says that the Roman belief is that “scripture and tradition make up a single deposit of divine revelation” so that “scripture’s interpretive richness extends” to the tradition. John E. Thiel, *Senses of Tradition: Continuity and Development in Catholic Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 10.

16. Oberman, “Quo Vadis, Petre?” 283.

17. *Ibid.*, 285.

18. “Proinde cum hodie hoc Dei verbum per predicatores legitime vocatos annunciat in Ecclesia, credimus ipsum verbum accunciari et a fidelibus recipi.” Heinrich Bullinger, “Confessio et Expositio Brevis et Simplex Sincerae Religionis Christianae etc.,” in *Creeeds*, 3:237.

Oberman found the same position in the Reformed orthodox theologian Johannes Wollebius (1586–1629), who taught that

this testimony is twofold, the principal and the ministerial. The principal is the strong testimony of the Holy Spirit in Scripture itself, and within the heart and mind of the believer being illuminated by the Spirit speaking to and persuading the believer of the divinity of Scripture. The ministerial testimony is the testimony of the church.¹⁹

In contrast to Tradition II, in which Scripture is controlled by a parallel source of authority in a developing tradition, the classical Reformed approach controlled tradition with the Scriptures but did not reject tradition as such. The Reformed tradition is what Wollebius called the “ministerial testimony” to the Scriptures.²⁰ The WCF expresses Tradition I when it says, “All synods or councils, since the apostles’ times, whether general or particular, may err; and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice, but to be used as a help in both” (31.4).²¹ It is not, however, as if the WCF grants to human assemblies no authority whatever, because every group calling itself “biblical” (e.g., the Socinians) and all the revisionists within the Reformed churches quote WCF 1.10.²² It is well to remember that WCF 31.2 also says, “It belongeth to synods and councils, ministerially to determine controversies of faith, and cases of conscience; to set down rules and directions for the better ordering of the public worship of God.” Further, such decisions are to be received with “reverence and submission.” What makes us Reformed is how

Oberman cited only a portion of this text, because he followed Heppé’s elliptical quotation. The fuller text is an even stronger statement of the view.

19. Oberman, “Quo Vadis, Petre?” 286 n. 63. Johannes Wollebius, *Christianae Theologiae Compendium*, ed. E. Bizer (Neukirchen: Kreis Moers, 1935), 2. “Testimonium hoc duplex est, principale et ministeriale. Principale est testimonium Spiritus Sancti fortis in ipsa Scriptura, intus vero in corde ac mente hominis fidelis ab ipso illuminati loquentis eique Scripturae divinitatem persuadentis. Ministeriale vero testimonium est testimonium ecclesiae.”

20. Oberman, “Quo Vadis, Petre?” 288–89.

21. *Creeds*, 3:670.

22. “The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.”

we understand Scripture, and this understanding is summarized in our confession. If we thought that our confession was not biblical, we would not use it, and if anyone can show that our confession is unbiblical, the church ought to revise it to bring it into conformity with Scripture.

The confessional Reformed approach to tradition (Tradition I), however, neither canonizes the past nor ignores it nor suspects it as an enemy, but rather treats it with the respect deserved by fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. This is the approach that J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937) adopted. He rejected the idea that the Reformed confessions are an obstacle to doctrinal progress, unless that progress is conceived, in Schleiermachieian terms, as an expression of the religious experience of a particular period. “Real doctrinal advance” does not mean substantial revision of classic or confessional Reformed theology. Instead, it means “greater precision and fullness of doctrinal statement,” and that statement is the setting forth of the truth of Scripture.²³

John Murray (1898–1975) also defended the necessity and usefulness of tradition.²⁴ “There is,” he argued, “a catholic, protestant and a reformed tradition.” To try to “extricate” ourselves from it would be “presumptuous and even absurd.”²⁵ In practice this tradition means that there is a “certain atmosphere . . . animated by a certain spirit” which “embraces a certain viewpoint” and “is characterized by a certain type of life and practice” and even “maintains certain types of institutions.” The difference between the confessional Reformed and Rome is not that we deny tradition, but that we do not venerate our Reformed tradition “with a feeling of piety and reverence equal to that with which Scripture is received and venerated.”²⁶ Tradition, properly understood, is subject to the authority and test of Scripture and as such has no intrinsic authority. Its authority is derived from Scripture. The Reformed tradition as expressed in the confessions “is the bond of fellowship, a bulwark against the incursion of errors, a testimony to the faith once delivered unto the saints and an instrument

23. J. Gresham Machen, “The Creeds and Doctrinal Advance,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 7 (1940): 35.

24. John Murray, “Tradition Romish and Protestant,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976–82), 4:264–73.

25. *Ibid.*, 269.

26. *Ibid.*, 270.

for the preservation of both purity and peace.”²⁷ For Murray, the derived authority of tradition was not insignificant. It meant, for example, that one who has subscribed the Reformed confessions is bound to uphold them. If he can no longer do so, *sola scriptura* does not authorize him to argue against the confessions from *within* the church. Rather, “his resort in such a case must be to renounce subscription and with such renunciation the privileges incident to it. Then he may proceed to expose the falsity of the creedal position in the light of Scripture. In a true sense, therefore, the creed, even in a reformed church has regulative authority.”²⁸ Murray was nothing if not a biblical theologian. So it is striking and instructive to note the degree to which he was willing to endorse and elaborate the historic Reformed approach to relating Scripture and tradition.

Perhaps another way of restating Murray’s full-bodied idea of tradition is to compare it to marriage. Reformed folk have chosen, in the light of Scripture and in conversation with the historic church, to identify with a particular tradition, a community of like-minded persons that adheres to a particular way of reading Scripture and to certain conclusions that follow from that reading. When two Christians marry, they do not imagine that the other is perfect in every way. This will have practical consequences. They make use of the means of grace and aim for greater sanctity, but the sins and blemishes of one’s spouse are not normally grounds for divorce or reasons for never marrying.²⁹

Stephen R. Holmes argues that Christians are best served by reading Scripture *with* our tradition. He observes, “Serious Christian theology has almost always interaction with the earlier tradition.”³⁰ More profoundly, Holmes notes, to “attempt to do theology without noticing the tradition, then, is to deny, or at least to attempt to escape from, our historical

27. *Ibid.*, 271–72.

28. *Ibid.*, 272.

29. Though we define tradition differently, nevertheless I agree with Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) when he speaks of tradition as part of a “transtemporal relationship” and argues that the transmission and reception of tradition is what makes us human. The modern suspicion of tradition represents “an unwarranted assumption of *auctoritas*.” Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Foundation*, trans. Mary Francis McCarthy (San Francisco: St. Ignatius, 1987), 87, 90.

30. Stephen R. Holmes, *Listening to the Past: The Place of Tradition in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 2.

locatedness.”³¹ D. G. Hart observes a similar discomfort among some conservative Reformed folk with “the human.” He argues that the “awkwardness with church history in Reformed and Presbyterian circles is a partial indication of the drastic remedy our theological tradition has prescribed in an effort to avoid the dilemmas posed by the human.”³² Such avoidance of the human and the historical, as intuitive and attractive as it might be to Americans, would be not only ironic for Reformed folk, but downright contrary to our theology. It was the Anabaptists, not the Reformed, who sought to do theology without reference to the past.³³ We begin with the distinction between the Creator and creature. Only God is, as it were, not “situated.” He is immense and simple. We are neither. We are complex (body and soul), local (*pace* our Lutheran cousins), and finite (*finitum non capax infiniti*). As such, to some degree we are products of the past, and therefore to refuse to account seriously for the past in our theology, piety, and practice is not only bad theology but is also dishonest.

As we begin to take steps toward recovering our own tradition, we have several examples to consider. Indeed, there is a renaissance of sorts occurring as folk from various traditions begin to reappropriate their own pasts as a way of equipping themselves to meet the future. This retrospective move grows out of dissatisfaction with late modernity.³⁴ Thomas Oden says,

The agenda for theology at the end of the twentieth century, following the steady deterioration of a hundred years and the disaster of the last few decades, is to begin to prepare the postmodern Christian community for its third millennium by returning again to the careful study and respectful following of the central tradition of classical Christian exegesis.³⁵

31. *Ibid.*, 6.

32. D. G. Hart, “The Divine and the Human in the Seminary Curriculum,” *WTJ* 65 (2003): 41.

33. Holmes, *Listening to the Past*, 15 nn. 40–42.

34. On this category see Zygmunt Bauman, “Postmodern Religion,” in *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*, ed. Paul Heelas et al. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); idem, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

35. Thomas C. Oden, *After Modernity What? Agenda for Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 34. See also Kenneth Tanner and Christopher A. Hall, eds., *Ancient*

Oden wants to recover what he calls classical Christianity, or the “ancient ecumenical orthodoxy,” or “paleo-orthodoxy,” that is, the history of exegesis and theology in the first millennium of the church.³⁶ To this end, he is sponsoring the publication, in English translation, of a multivolume patristic (and early medieval) biblical commentary.³⁷

David Steinmetz has also turned his back on the modernist-critical approach to Scripture in favor of more traditional approaches. In his brilliant essay “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” he argues that the historical-critical method as practiced for the last two hundred years has failed to win over the religious community not because of that community’s sloth, ignorance, or conservatism, but because the historical-critical method does not work. “Until the historical-critical method becomes critical of its own theoretical foundations and develops a hermeneutical theory adequate to the nature of the text which it is interpreting, it will remain restricted . . . to the guild and the academy.”³⁸ In this essay he contrasts the historical-critical method with medieval hermeneutics, but he might well have contrasted it with the way the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed theologians also read the Bible.

Richard Muller and John Thompson accept the invitation to recover and appropriate the premodern exegetical tradition. As they note, the term “precritical” was coined by modernists who used it derisively as a synonym for uncritical.³⁹ Nothing could be further from the truth. The precritical exegetes had a different method, different standards of evaluation, and a different stance toward the Bible. In describing the difference between the critical and premodern handling of Isaiah 7:14, Muller and Thompson note that what often separates critical from precritical biblical exegesis is

and Postmodern Christianity (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002). See also Thomas C. Oden, *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy: Signs of New Life in Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2003).

36. Oden, *After Modernity*, 36–37.

37. Thomas C. Oden et al., eds., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998–).

38. David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” *Theology Today* 37 (1980): 38.

39. Richard A. Muller and John L. Thompson, “The Significance of Precritical Exegesis: Retrospect and Prospect,” in *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation: Essays Presented to David C. Steinmetz in Honor of His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Richard A. Muller and John L. Thompson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 335.

not disagreement over “critical method, but over critical presuppositions, indeed over the matter of the community of interpretation and what comprises its ethos. For the ‘precritical’ exegetes, a truly critical understanding must include a scrutiny of the text in the light of the broader scope of Isaiah’s prophecy and of the relationship of the Old Testament to the New.”⁴⁰ Unlike many modern Bible readers, “Christian exegetes traditionally have assumed that a divine purpose and divine authorship unite the text of the entire canon.”⁴¹ Precritical exegesis offers great help in recovering the notion that Bible interpretation is a “churchly exercise that must take place in such a way that particular texts are understood . . . in their immediate context and in their canonical relationships.”⁴²

Most recently John Thompson has advanced the project of reading Scripture with the church by considering a series of difficult biblical texts (e.g., the stories of Hagar, Jephthah’s daughter, and Gomer) as they have been interpreted and applied by a series of premodern interpreters from the patristic period through the Reformation.⁴³ There are other examples of reappropriation of the past. For example, among some European Roman Catholics (e.g., Henri de Lubac) the reappropriation of patristic and medieval sources has come to be known as *ressourcement*.⁴⁴ Among (mainly) Anglicans, radical orthodoxy is a project devoted, in part, to recovering the broader Christian tradition. Led by John Millbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, Anglicans all, radical orthodoxy rejects both modernist mediating theology (the Ritschlian “kernel and husk” approach) and post-modern pluralism, arguing for a return to a Platonist vision of Augustinian Christianity.⁴⁵ Among evangelicals we have already observed Stephen Holmes’s program for appropriation of the tradition, and there are others.

40. *Ibid.*, 339.

41. *Ibid.*, 340.

42. *Ibid.*, 345.

43. John L. Thompson, *Reading the Bible with the Dead: What You Can Learn from the History of Exegesis That You Can’t Learn from Exegesis Alone* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

44. For example see Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. 1: *The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

45. See John Millbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (New York: Routledge, 1999). R. R. Reno has criticized the movement as being mortally wounded by its neo-Platonism and its modernist and idealist approach to the tradition. See R. R. Reno, “The Radical Orthodoxy Project,” *First Things* (February 2000).

D. H. Williams is mediating the idea of a broader catholic tradition and appreciation for patristic theology to the free church tradition.⁴⁶ Richard Lints calls evangelicals to take their discrete various traditions seriously.⁴⁷ He contends that the neoevangelical dream of a generic panevangelical theology is dead and gives us permission to be unapologetically, confessionally Reformed and to reengage our own tradition.

According to Richard Muller, what we find when we begin to read the confessional Reformed theologians from the period of orthodoxy (c. 1565–1700) is that they were “true to the Scriptural mandate of the Reformation. They consistently refused to place confession above Scripture and constantly affirmed their confessions as expressions of the truth taught in Scripture.”⁴⁸ So, this call to reappropriate the confessional Reformed tradition is, in one sense, a call to look back, but only temporarily. There is nothing wrong with looking back long enough to gain sufficient wisdom and perspective to move forward.

Like Oden and radical orthodoxy, confessional Reformed folk have always had a deep appreciation for the fathers and the medieval theologians. Indeed, the early categories of modern patrology were established, in part, by Protestant scholars such as Johannes Oecolampadius (1482–1531) and Philipp Melancthon (1497–1560), who searched the fathers for alternatives to the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation.⁴⁹ According to Irena Backus, Martin Bucer made considerable and thoughtful use of the fathers and the medieval tradition.⁵⁰ Calvin was a serious, if sometimes ambivalent, student of the fathers and medievals. Though there is little evidence that Calvin knew Thomas Aquinas’s theology directly, there is evidence that he knew the primary textbook of medieval theology, the

46. D. H. Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

47. Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 96.

48. Richard A. Muller, *Scholasticism and Orthodoxy in the Reformed Tradition: An Attempt at Definition* (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1995), 20.

49. See Pierre Fraenkel, *Testimonia Patrum: The Function of the Patristic Argument in the Theology of Philip Melancthon* (Geneva: E. Droz, 1961). See also E. P. Meijering, *Melancthon and Patristic Thought: The Doctrines of Christ, Grace, the Trinity and the Creation* (Leiden: Brill, 1983).

50. Irena Backus, “Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Bucer and the Church Fathers,” in *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: From the Carolingians to the Maurists*, ed. Irena Backus (New York: E. J. Brill, 1997), 2:644–66.

Sentences of Peter Lombard (1155–58), and that he was particularly well read in Bernard of Clairvaux.⁵¹

The orthodox Reformed theologians from the late sixteenth century and through the seventeenth century had even greater access and recourse to the patristic and medieval theologians than most of the first and second generation Reformers.⁵² The Reformed orthodox demonstrated a remarkable catholicity of spirit and knowledge and drew upon the entire Christian tradition to formulate their theology.⁵³ If we are to follow the classic Reformed pattern, we too must become scholars of the fathers and even of the medieval theologians, who established much of the Christian theological vocabulary and the intellectual categories in which both the Reformers and the post-Reformation theologians did their work.

For our purposes, it is important to realize that we have an even stronger historical and theological connection to the orthodox theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, than we have to the patristic and medieval theologians, since it was the Reformed orthodox in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who formed our theology, piety, and practice. For all our genuine admiration of the intellectual and theological achievement of Anselm (without whom we might still be teaching the ransom theory of the atonement),⁵⁴ Thomas Aquinas, and Lombard (from whom we have received so much of our vocabulary), and particularly the late medieval neo-Augustinians (e.g., Thomas Bradwardine, Gregory of Rimini, Johann von Staupitz, and John Wycliffe), with whom we have much in common,⁵⁵ there is a gulf fixed between us and them: not Lessing's "ugly ditch" but

51. See A. N. S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999). See also Johannes Van Oort, "John Calvin and the Church Fathers," in *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West*, ed. Backus, 2:661–700.

52. Irena Backus shows that the older use of patristic sources did not disappear immediately. See "The Fathers and Calvinist Orthodoxy: Patristic Scholarship," in *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West*, 2:839–65. See also E. P. Meijering, "The Fathers and Calvinist Orthodoxy: Systematic Theology," in *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West*, 2:867–87.

53. Contra Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in the Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 105.

54. R. Scott Clark, "Atonement: Medieval Times and Reformation Era," in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, ed. Hans-Josef Klauck et al. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008).

55. See Heiko A. Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation: The Shape of Late Medieval Thought* (London: Lutterworth, 1967).

the Reformation. We live on this side of the Reformation, and though we embrace many of the same doctrines as our medieval forebears, we also embrace the conviction that sinners are justified only on the ground of the righteousness of Christ imputed to us and received through faith alone, a theological insight learned from Luther, Calvin, and Reformed orthodoxy, not from the fathers or the medieval theologians.

Narcissus Reformed

The purpose of the fable of Narcissus is to warn of the danger of self-absorption and to warn against mistaking subjective experience for objective reality. Like Narcissus many in the Reformed churches have spurned the objective reality of the Reformed confession in favor of their own reflection. Writing in the late 1970s, in his savage critique of late modern life, Christopher Lasch described the modern man as the “new narcissist,”⁵⁶ who has no interest in the future because he has no interest in or connection to the past. According to Lasch, because of the subjective, therapeutic religion of the age, modern man is losing his sense of historical continuity, that is, his ability to identify with those who went before him. Philip Rieff has reached a similar conclusion and describes the modern personality as “psychological man.” Tom Wolfe describes late modern narcissism, including evangelicalism, as “The Me Generation and the Third Great Awakening.”⁵⁷

In an analogous way, students, parishioners, pastors, and elders are sometimes quite surprised to find that views and practices that they hold dear, which they assume to be Reformed and perhaps even essential to being genuinely Reformed, have actually very little to do with being

56. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), xvi. Thomas De Zengotita has updated this criticism. See Thomas De Zengotita, *Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live in It* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005).

57. Lasch, *Culture of Narcissism*, xvii, 5. Lasch was part of a stream of analysis of modernity including Philip Rieff, Tom Wolfe, and most recently Thomas De Zengotita. See Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud*, fortieth anniversary edition (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006); Tom Wolfe, *Mauve Gloves and Madmen, Clutter and Vine, and Other Stories, Sketches, and Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), 126–67; De Zengotita, *Mediated*.

Reformed as understood by the confessional tradition. It seems to be widely assumed today that whatever one understands Scripture to teach or imply must ipso facto be Reformed. The reasoning seems to be thus: I am Reformed, I think p , and therefore p must be Reformed. Of course, stating it like this shows immediately the folly of such logic. One may be thoroughly Reformed theologically and a member in good standing in a Reformed church and hold views at variance with our confession about any number of things.

How have we arrived at such a place where it is possible for Reformed folk to be narcissists about theology, piety, and practice? Is it possible that we are tempted to think that, having determined to bring every square inch under the lordship of Christ, we are now in no need of correction?⁵⁸ As we will see in the following chapters, it seems that just as we began to speak about bringing everything under Christ's dominion, we were really in the process of bringing less of Reformed theology, piety, and practice under Christ's dominion. Some in the Reformed community have come to believe that everything they do is premised on some Reformed principle and is, for that reason, beyond criticism. Isolated historically from the classical Reformed tradition, operating on the basis of timeless principles derived from Scripture, ostensibly bringing every thought captive to Christ, and at war with modernity over evolution, morality, and civil polity through the course of the twentieth century, many erstwhile Reformed folk unintentionally and unwittingly became narcissists, not necessarily in their lifestyle but in theology, piety, and practice.

Despite the enormous amount of labor that has been expended by Reformed schools and churches to oppose modernism, to insulate children from the ravages of unbelieving thought, and our commitment to Reformed principles notwithstanding, we are much more influenced by

58. I am indebted to Bob Godfrey for this point. There seems to be resurgence in interest in Abraham Kuyper's transformationalist approach to relating Christ and culture. See Peter S. Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper's Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Vincent D. Bacote, *The Spirit in Public Theology: Appropriating the Legacy of Abraham Kuyper* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005). The transformationalist agenda seems to reach into every nook and cranny of life. See, e.g., Richard Mouw's claim that we must even redeem recreation, in *Politics and the Biblical Drama* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 64.

modernity than we realize. As D. G. Hart has noted, by refusing to use the Reformed confessions as the norm by which questions of biblical interpretation and theological formulation were addressed, “conservatives were reduced to the same status as liberals, with each side claiming its views were biblical.”⁵⁹ Just as the Enlightenment proclaimed a new era in human progress, analogously, with the arrival of Kuyper and Van Til, perhaps we told ourselves that we had arrived at a new epoch in Reformed theology. The effect of such thinking has been to create a divorce between our tradition and us. Some of the claims made about Van Til’s uniqueness or importance have probably fueled such exaggerated self-perceptions. For example, John Frame calls Cornelius Van Til “perhaps the most important Christian thinker since Calvin.”⁶⁰

And so many Reformed folk unintentionally and unwittingly have become narcissists in the way they read the Bible and do theology. This way of reading Scripture has been well described as “biblicism.” The earliest use of the word “biblicism” in English occurred in 1827 in a work by Sophei Finngan in criticism of “biblicism.”⁶¹ In 1874 J. J. van Osterzee defined it as “idolatry of the letter.”⁶² In theological literature, “biblicism” has most often been used derisively to describe approaches that ignore general revelation in the interpretation of Scripture. This obscurantism takes different forms. In some cases, the wrong text is used to prove a doctrine. In other cases, a biblical text is interpreted to teach physics or astronomy (e.g., geocentrism), or the Scriptures are read in isolation from the Christian tradition.⁶³

Though the term “biblicism” is relatively modern, the stance toward ecclesiastical authority it signifies is not new. In the years leading up to

59. Hart, *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism*, 105.

60. John Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1995), 44.

61. Sophei Finngan, *The Mania of Seduction Unmasked, or a Scriptural View of the Rise, Progress and Decline of Biblicism* (Cork, Ireland: T. Geary, 1827).

62. “Biblicism” in *OED*.

63. John Frame offers a helpful summary of the various senses of the term. See John Frame, “In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism: Reflections on Sola Scriptura and History in Theological Method,” *WTJ* 59 (1997): 269–91. See also H. Franz, “Biblicism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. E. H. Palmer (Marshallton, DE: National Fund for Christian Education, 1964–72).

the Synod of Dort, the same spirit that prompted the Arminian conflict also manifested itself in the rejection of the authority of the HC. Hermanus Herbertsz, a pastor in Dordrecht and Gouda, refused to preach the catechism. From 1582 to 1607 Pastor Herbertsz repeatedly promised and then refused to use the HC as directed by various assemblies in the Dutch Reformed churches. As Donald Sinnema observes, Herbertsz's objections were not to the doctrine of the catechism but to its *authority*. He charged the Reformed churches with placing the catechism above God's Word. He said,

You not only consider [the Catechism] equal to Holy Scripture . . . but place it above; this I can prove by the following reasons: first, you have divided into fifty-two Sundays, and every Sunday read and explain a part of it from the pulpit as if it were God's Word . . . ; second, you also place it so much above Holy Scripture that you make Holy Scripture a servant by which one must explain and interpret [the Catechism].⁶⁴

Sinnema observes that this charge also became popular with the Remonstrants.⁶⁵ Herbertsz rejected the ecclesiastically agreed and sanctioned interpretation of Scripture in favor of his understanding of Scripture. It is not as if there were no mechanism in Reformed church government to reform the church's confession and bring it into line with Scripture. What Herbertsz portrayed as an act of piety was really an expression of autonomy and individual authority.

In his criticism of Klaas Schilder (1890–1952) and his followers in the Liberated (*Vrijgemaakt*) Reformed Church in the Netherlands, Valentine Hepp (1879–1950) accused Schilder of biblicism, the chief mark of which, as William Masselink summarized, is that the Schilderites consistently “pass by the confessions,” so that, “by using terminology in conflict with the confessions, they are ushering in Biblicism.”⁶⁶ Following Hepp, Masselink

64. Hermanus Herbertsz, *Naeder Verklaringhe over 32 Articulen* (1592) printed in *Documenta Reformatoria* (Kampen: Kok, 1960), 1:274, cited in Donald W. Sinnema, “The Second Service in the Early Dutch Reformed Tradition,” *CTJ* 32 (1997): 315.

65. Sinnema, “Second Service,” 315.

66. William Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace: A Defence of the Historic Reformed Faith over against the Theology and Philosophy of the So-Called “Reconstructionist Movement”* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 24.

identified three types of biblicism: first, that which rejects all confessions as human productions; second, that which defends the propriety of confessions, but relativizes them so as to make them need constant revision; third, that which professes respect for the confessions but ignores or misinterprets them.⁶⁷ As a result of the third type of biblicism particularly, Masselink (and Hepp) argued that the great danger of the new Reformed biblicism is that it tends to be unhistorical, not accounting for the work of Calvin and the classic Reformed theologians. As a consequence, Hepp warned, we run the risk of Calvinism without Calvin.⁶⁸

The nineteenth-century German-pietist biblical theology movement was a type of biblicism, an attempt to recover biblical vocabulary and thought categories in reaction to the arid and destructive higher-critical movement.⁶⁹ This movement tended to reject systematic theology as a discipline. In response, the Princeton theologians Geerhardus Vos and B. B. Warfield agreed that there is nothing intrinsic to biblical or exegetical theology that requires it to be at odds with dogmatic or systematic theology.⁷⁰ John Murray, a student of both Vos and Warfield, defended the same view at Westminster Seminary in the middle of the twentieth century.⁷¹

Through the twentieth century, certain elements of North American fundamentalism and neoorthodoxy have set systematic theology over against biblical theology, and this antisystematic use of Scripture is also described as biblicism. James Callahan proposes to unite the two approaches in a biblicism “rejuvenated” through dialogue with the so-called Yale School or postliberalism.⁷² Without denying the benefits offered by the Yale School, chiefly the call to live with the Bible’s conceptual world,

67. *Ibid.*

68. *Ibid.*, 25.

69. See Geerhardus Vos, “The Idea of Biblical Theology,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980).

70. *Idem*, *Dogmatiek*, 5 vols. in 3 (Grand Rapids: Theological School of the Christian Reformed Churches in North America, 1910), 65. See also B. B. Warfield, *Studies in Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932), 65.

71. John Murray, “Systematic Theology,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 1:9.

72. James Callahan, “The Bible Says: Evangelical and Postliberal Biblicism,” *Theology Today* 53 (1997): 463.

the basic difficulty of uniting the postliberal reading of Scripture with what Callahan describes as “precritical” or “premodern” theology is that a confessional Reformed reading of Scripture presupposes that there are genuine extramental referents to the scriptural narratives. Postliberalism, however, while interested in reading Scripture within canonical limits, does not require or presuppose the same referents. For this reason, Michael Horton has suggested that postliberalism is “not postliberal enough.”⁷³

Though acknowledging the difficulties in reclaiming biblicism, John Frame has also proposed to rehabilitate biblicism for use by Reformed Christians.⁷⁴ He wants to resolve the problem, in part, by affirming that there are extrabiblical *data* for which the Christian must account in reading Scripture, but also by denying that there is any such thing as extrabiblical *knowledge*.⁷⁵ Therefore all knowledge is, by definition, biblical knowledge. His second step to rehabilitating biblicism is to affirm only slightly milder versions of the four versions of biblicism he earlier denied. For example, he argues that a genuine practice of *sola scriptura* will sometimes be confused with biblicism.⁷⁶

There are three criticisms of this quasi-biblicist revision of *sola scriptura*, the first historical, the second theological, and the third confessional. Frame’s claim that the genuine practice of *sola scriptura* will sometimes be confused with biblicism is unfounded historically. D. H. Williams is correct when he says that the sixteenth-century Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura* was “not intended to be *scriptura nuda*.”⁷⁷ That, according to the Reformers, Scripture functions as the norm of faith and practice did not mean that Scripture was the sole resource of the Christian faith.⁷⁸ It would be more accurate for Frame to say that the American evangelical appropriation of *sola scriptura* may look biblicist, because it often is.⁷⁹

73. Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 96.

74. Frame, “In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism,” 272.

75. *Ibid.*, 273.

76. *Ibid.*, 275.

77. Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition*, 97.

78. *Ibid.*

79. *Ibid.*, 99–102. As valuable as his work is, Williams’s account of the development of the doctrine of justification is flawed (126–42) and owes more to secondary surveys of Luther’s doctrine and the current evangelical ecumenical imperative than it does to a close reading of

As we have seen, Frame's characterization of *sola scriptura* does not accord with Oberman's account of the Reformation view of the relations between Scripture and tradition. Luther did rebel against a millennium of theology and against an enormously powerful ecclesiastical-civil complex. Nevertheless, he consistently claimed that he was recovering the best doctrine of the early church and even that of some of the better medieval theologians (e.g., Bernard). In preparation for the council that would eventually become the Council of Trent, Luther published in 1539 *On the Councils and the Church*.⁸⁰ There he mocked the papacy and magisterium as "masters" of the law, works, and sanctity but not Scripture. Even in the midst of satire, he was careful to note that he did not pretend to read Scripture by himself or as if no one had read it before him:

For I know that none of them attempted to read a book of Holy Scripture in school, or to use the writings of the fathers as an aid, as I did. Let them take a book of Holy Scripture and seek out the glosses of the fathers; then they will share the experience I had when I worked on the letter to the Hebrews with St. Chrysostom's glosses, the letter to Titus and the letter to the Galatians with the help of St. Jerome, Genesis with the help of St. Ambrose and St. Augustine, the Psalter with all the writers available, and so on. I have read more than they think, and have worked my way through all the books; this makes them appear impudent indeed who imagine that I did not read the fathers and who want to recommend them to me as something precious, the very thing that I was forced to devalue twenty years ago when I read the Scriptures.⁸¹

This passage is telling about his mature view of extrabiblical authority. Luther read Scripture *with* the fathers, but he was not enslaved to them. He understood that councils and the fathers often contradicted

primary Reformation sources. For an account of Luther's doctrine see R. Scott Clark, "Justitia Imputata: Alien or Proper to Luther's Doctrine of Justification?" *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 70 (2006): 269–310; idem, "The Benefits of Christ: Justification in Protestant Theology before the Westminster Assembly," in *The Faith Once Delivered: Celebrating the Legacy of Reformed Systematic Theology and the Westminster Assembly (Essays in Honor of Dr. Wayne Spear)*, ed. Anthony T. Selva (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007).

80. LW, vol. 41.

81. LW, 41:19.

one another.⁸² This passage is especially fascinating because the period to which he refers was that in which he was reaching his mature Protestant views on the doctrine of justification.⁸³ In other words, Luther did not reach his doctrine of justification by simply reading Scripture. Rather, he reached it by reading Scripture in dialogue with the Christian tradition. His reading of Scripture was definitive but not isolated.

Second, by way of theological criticism, by denying extrabiblical knowledge and making all knowledge “biblical,” Frame, as David Wells points out, has neglected an important distinction in Reformed theology, between the “external beginning of knowledge” (*principium cognoscendi externum*) or general revelation and the “internal beginning of knowledge” (*principium cognoscendi internum*), or biblical revelation.⁸⁴ It is true that whatever a human being knows is conditioned by the existence of divine revelation. As creatures made in God’s image, all humans live in a universe created by divine speech (“And God said . . .”), and even the most creative person is only reorganizing facts and truths that are the result of general revelation. Not everyone or everything, however, is revealed *in Scripture*. Special revelation speaks *to* football games, but not *of* them. Scripture speaks primarily, though not exclusively, about God’s moral will for his image-bearers and about his saving acts and revelation in Christ, that is, law and gospel. By folding together general and special revelation, Frame has plunged us back into the very sort of biblicism that he ostensibly seeks to avoid.

As Richard Muller indicates in his response to Frame’s criticisms, *sola scriptura* is the “doctrinal watchword in all matters of faith and life.” The Reformed confession has always distinguished between the way Scripture speaks to Christian doctrine and living and the way it speaks to the rest of life.⁸⁵ As Muller notes, the net effect of Frame’s exaggeration of the sufficiency of Scripture is not to elevate the authority of Scripture itself but to elevate Frame’s *application* of it. A “broadly defined appeal to *sola*

82. *LW*, 41:20. See also 24. For more on this see Manfred Schulze, “Martin Luther and the Church Fathers,” in *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West*, 2:573–626.

83. On this see Clark, “*Iustitia Aliena*.”

84. David F. Wells, “On Being Framed,” *WTJ* 59 (1997): 294.

85. Richard A. Muller, “Historiography in the Service of Theology and Worship: Toward Dialogue with John Frame,” *WTJ* 59 (1997): 302.

Scriptura or to methodological principles of Scripture” provides no help since, unless Scripture is read within a “confessional context,” it can be “bent in all directions.”⁸⁶

Not every appeal to Scripture is Reformed or reforming. Any appeal to Scripture that fundamentally overturns what it is to be Reformed cannot itself be a Reformed appeal to Scripture. Frame’s definition of theology is that it is the “application of the Word of God by persons to all areas of life.”⁸⁷ Rather than beginning with God and his revelation as the objective norm relative to us and our experience, this definition begins with our experience and us because it is we who do the applying of Scripture. As a result, despite his disavowals of the bad forms of biblicism, Frame nevertheless affirms as models of creative biblicism, among other movements, theonomy and the revision of the doctrine of justification proposed by Norman Shepherd.⁸⁸

As a confessional matter, Frame’s proposal threatens to confuse the biblical and confessional notion of the unique, sole authority of Scripture with American evangelical individualism. It seems to give support to the Roman Catholic critique of Protestantism, that we really do subject the Christian religion to the whims of millions of private judgments. Yet, nothing could have been further from the minds of those who wrote our confessions. The WCF says, “The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture” (1.10).⁸⁹ We confess that the Christian religion is a public religion that is measured by a publicly accessible, divinely revealed text. Notice that the Confession expressly mentions “opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits” among those things to be tested by Scripture. In other words, the divines understood (and we confess with them) *sola scriptura* not to teach that the Bible means what one says it does, but

86. *Ibid.*, 308.

87. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 81.

88. Frame, “In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism,” 278.

89. *Creeeds*, 3:605–6.

that the Scriptures, being God's Word, form the church, and the church in subjection to the Scriptures is able to interpret them well enough to decide controversies.

The Reformed have always understood that saying that Scripture alone is the final judge in all religious questions does not settle every interpretation of every text. We confess,

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them. (WCF 1.7)⁹⁰

Our confession strikes an admirable balance. On the one hand, there are difficult places in Scripture (e.g., the circumcision of Moses' son by Zipporah, Ex. 4:24–26). Nevertheless, on the other hand, in contrast to late modern subjectivism, what must be known can be known, so that even the “unlearned” by a “due use of the ordinary means” (the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments) “may attain unto a sufficient” grasp of the teaching of Scripture.

The BC addresses the question of the relations between private and public, corporate and individual authority:

Neither may we consider any writings of men, however holy these men may have been, of equal value with those divine Scriptures, nor ought we to consider custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils or decrees or statutes, as of equal value with the truth of God, since the truth is above all; for all men are of themselves liars, and more vain than vanity itself. Therefore we reject with all our hearts whatever does not agree with this infallible rule, as the apostles have taught us, saying, Test the spirits, whether they are of God. Likewise: any one who comes to you and brings not this teaching, receive him not into your house. (Art. 7)⁹¹

90. *Ibid.*, 3:603.

91. *Ibid.*, 3:388–89.

The BC does not reject human interpretations of Scripture as valueless (that was an Anabaptist view), but neither does it confuse them with Scripture. The confession does not ignore the visible church, but neither does it make the Scriptures a creature of the church. The Scriptures have the unique office of not only being interpreted but of interpreting the interpreter.

Our Uneasy Relation to Our Own Past

Not all Reformed folk feel at ease with the Reformed tradition. This discomfort exists on two levels, practically and theoretically. On the practical level most Americans feel little real connection to the Christian past. To the degree that they realize that there is such a thing, they do not see that it has any relevance to them. This natural reluctance is the first thing that must be overcome.

The second level of dis-ease with the past is theoretical. To Oberman's categories of Tradition I and Tradition II, Alister McGrath adds a third, which describes the radical (e.g., Anabaptist) approach to tradition, which he designates Tradition 0. This is a fundamentally individualistic approach to Scripture and tradition which "placed private judgment of the individual above the corporate judgment of the Christian church concerning the interpretation of Scripture. It was a recipe for anarchy."⁹² It is this third approach to tradition that most American evangelicals have followed, mistaking it regularly for the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura*. It was this (T-0) approach that the notorious revivalist Charles Finney (1792–1875) advocated:

Every uninspired attempt to frame for the church an authoritative standard of opinion which shall be regarded as the unquestionable exposition of the word of God, is not only impious in itself, but also a tacit assumption of the fundamental dogma of the Papacy. The Assembly of Divines did more than to assume the necessity of a Pope to give law to the opinions of men; they assumed to create an immortal

92. Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 144–45.

one, or rather to embalm their own creed, and preserve it as the Pope of all generations.⁹³

For Finney, the very act of creating an ecclesiastical statement of faith was a worse presumption than a papal bull, since popes die, but the Westminster Confession will not, at least not soon enough for Finney. He continued, however, by raising an even more profound question about the relevance of the Confession in the modern period: "That an instrument framed by that assembly should in the nineteenth century be recognized as the standard of the church, or of an intelligent branch of it, is not only amazing, but I must say that it is most ridiculous."⁹⁴ Finney assumed that all reasonable modern people would share his assumption, that we are mature, enlightened, and have progressed beyond the backward views of seventeenth-century Reformed orthodoxy.

Unfortunately, there are Reformed folk who, even if implicitly, share attitudes not altogether dissimilar from Finney's attitudes toward the past and the present. In Reformed circles, these attitudes are manifest in discomfort with the Reformed past, particularly with the period of Reformed orthodoxy. This form of self-loathing is particularly striking because it is often aimed at the period, theologians, and even confessions that gave us our theology, piety, and practice.

There is a second part to the theoretical problem. It is the nominalist spirit of our age that suggests that it is misleading to speak of *the* Reformed confession, or *the* Reformed theology, piety, and practice. Are there not in fact several traditions that call themselves Reformed? A proper answer to this question could and perhaps should take up another book. Briefly, however, as I read the history of Reformed theology, there has always been a genuine and substantial unity amidst the diversity and that unity is expressed in the Reformed confessions and in the mainstream of Reformed theology, piety, and practice.⁹⁵ Between 1523 and 1675, no fewer than twenty-five major confessions or catechisms appeared. In addition to these, there were too many regional, local, and minor confessions to

93. Dennis Carroll, ed., *Charles Finney's Systematic Theology*, new expanded ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1994), 3.

94. *Ibid.*

95. See Holmes, *Listening to the Past*, 82–85.

mention here.⁹⁶ Even if we consider only these twenty-five documents, nevertheless, in the space of 152 years, the Reformed churches published, on average, a major confession every six years. If we add just a few of the minor confessions, the frequency with which the Reformed churches published confessions becomes even greater. What is most important is that, despite the regional diversity and minor variations in expression, the doctrine was substantially the same in all the major documents. With respect to Reformed theology, consider the example of covenant theology. It is sometimes suggested that there were multiple Reformed approaches to covenant theology. Recent research, however, suggests that there was a typical covenant theology that developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁹⁷

Another reason why contemporary Reformed folk may be ill at ease with their tradition is that, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many accepted the premise that Calvin's theology is the norm for Reformed theology and the conclusion that his Reformed orthodox successors were not really faithful to him. Since Calvin's death, at least four camps have claimed to be the true heir of his theology: the Arminians, the Amyraldians, the orthodox Calvinists, and more recently the neoorthodox or Barthians. The approach that set Calvin against Reformed orthodoxy more or less dominated Calvin studies and consequently the understanding of Reformed orthodoxy from the middle of the nineteenth century through the late twentieth century.⁹⁸

By now it is well known, or at least should be, that Alexander Schweizer (1808–88) argued that there was in Lutheranism and in Reformed theology

96. Unfortunately, many of these documents remain unavailable in English and can only be found in collections such as H. A. Niemeyer, *Collectio Confessionum in Ecclesiis Reformatis Publicatarum* (Leipzig: Julius Klinkhardt, 1840).

97. See R. Scott Clark, ed., *Covenant, Justification and Pastoral Ministry: Essays by the Faculty of Westminster Seminary California* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006), chapters 1, 6, 8, 12.

98. On this debate see Carl R. Trueman and R. Scott Clark, *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1999). See also Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); idem, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); idem, PRRD; W. J. Van Asselt and Eef Dekker, *Reformation and Scholasticism: An Ecumenical Enterprise* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).

a series of “central dogmas.”⁹⁹ The Lutheran central dogma was said to be justification by grace alone through faith alone, and the Reformed central dogma was said to be predestination. He argued that the Reformed orthodox deduced a speculative theology from their doctrine of the divine decree.¹⁰⁰ Schweizer’s account of Reformed theology was not organized according to the logic of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century systems “but according to the requirements of his own Schleiermachian theological system.”¹⁰¹

Writing about the same time, Heinrich Hepppe (1820–79) argued that there were multiple and competing strains within Reformed theology.¹⁰² One strain was said to be the Calvinist-predestinarian strain that prompted a covenantal, Melanchthonian reaction in the Palatinate “standing halfway between the Lutherans and the Calvinists.”¹⁰³ Hepppe’s presentation of Reformed theology is particularly important because it was Karl Barth’s primary source for his knowledge of Reformed orthodoxy, and Barth’s influence has been massive, even in confessional Reformed circles. Further, Hepppe’s summary of Reformed orthodoxy was translated into English in the middle of the twentieth century and has been used widely by students of Protestant scholasticism.¹⁰⁴ Not having read the sources in context, they fail to recognize that his presentation is “marred by a series of profound problems.”¹⁰⁵ Muller says that “Hepppe arranges his dogmatics in such a way as to place the doctrine of predestination prior to creation, in relation to the doctrine of God. This was a pattern followed by a large number of seventeenth-century systems, but not by all of the Protestant scholastics—certainly not by all of those cited by Hepppe.”¹⁰⁶

99. Alexander Schweizer, *Die Glaubenslehre der evangelisch-reformierten Kirche*, 2 vols. (Zürich: Orell, Füssli und Co., 1844–47); idem, *Die Protestantischen Centraldogmen in ihrer Entwicklung innerhalb der reformierten Kirche*, 2 vols. (Zürich: Orell, Füssli und Co., 1854–56).

100. Muller, *PRRD*, 1:124.

101. *Ibid.*, 1:131.

102. Heinrich Hepppe, *Geschichte des deutschen Protestantismus in den Jahren 1555–1581*, 4 vols. (Marburg: N. G. Elwert, 1852–59).

103. Muller, *PRRD*, 1:130.

104. Heinrich Hepppe, *Die Dogmatik der evangelisch-reformierten Kirche* (Elberfeld: K. R. Friderichs, 1861); idem, *Reformed Dogmatics Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: George Allen and Unwin LTD, 1950).

105. Muller, *PRRD*, 1:130.

106. *Ibid.*

It is well known, however, that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, those who generally identified with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed orthodoxy also harbored at least some doubts about their orthodox forebears. One recent study of Joseph Addison Alexander (1809–60) suggests that he was not opposed to setting Calvin against the Calvinists, at least to a small degree.¹⁰⁷ Thus, when, in the early twentieth century, Charles Augustus Briggs (1841–1913) attempted to set Calvin against the Calvinists, he was not speaking only for liberals. He argued that the medieval theologians “combined the study of the Creeds and the Fathers with the Scriptures under the head of ‘Positive Theology,’ and so distinguished the Theology based on the authority of Christ and His Church, from the Scholastic Theology as systematized by the Scholastic theologians in the use of the Aristotelian philosophy.”¹⁰⁸ The Reformers, he said,

discarded the Scholastic Theology, and reverted to the Positive Theology, in which they recognized the Scriptures as the only divine authority, but the Creeds of the ancient Church as valid summaries of the doctrines of Scripture. . . . So Calvin sought his material in the Bible; but his structural principle was not the Aristotelian philosophy, but the order of the Apostles’ Creed, which he follows strictly, only making a fourfold division instead of the traditional twelvefold.¹⁰⁹

Of the Reformed orthodox Briggs said: “The successors of the Reformers in the seventeenth century reintroduced the Aristotelian philosophy as the constructive principle in their systems of Theology; and so gave a newer Scholastic Theology in which they merged the older Positive Theology. And so the distinction between Positive and Scholastic

107. Andrew J. Whealy, “A Reformed Biblicist, and Always Reforming Church Historian: An Appraisal of the Scriptural and Historical Hermeneutic of Joseph Addison Alexander, 1833–1860” (master of arts thesis, Westminster Seminary California, 2005), 89–100. See also Lefferts A. Loetscher, *Facing the Enlightenment and Pietism: Archibald Alexander and the Founding of Princeton Theological Seminary*, Contributions to the Study of Religion 8 (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1983), 207, which suggests that Alexander might have been reacting to Johann Friedrich Stapfer, whom he read and who Muller says married Reformed orthodoxy with “rational supernaturalistic philosophy” with, however, little effect on the product (PRRD, 1:83).

108. Charles Augustus Briggs, *Theological Symbolics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1914), 6.

109. *Ibid.*, 7.

Theology passed out of view.”¹¹⁰ By the time Karl Barth made similar claims in the early twentieth century, he was following a well-worn path and making sounds that resonated with those in and out of confessional Reformed circles.¹¹¹

Nevertheless, it is a little surprising to witness a certain ambivalence toward the Reformed past within a citadel of Reformed orthodoxy such as the old Westminster Seminary faculty. For example, Cornelius Van Til’s rhetoric about and approach to the past may have prepared his students to sympathize with the Calvin versus the Calvinists argument when writers such as Basil Hall and R. T. Kendall resuscitated it.¹¹² In Van Til’s vocabulary, “scholastic” is nearly always a pejorative, most often referring to medieval theology, specifically Thomas Aquinas for whom Van Til had little patience.¹¹³ He rarely interacted seriously, however, with his own theological tradition, at least as it existed between Calvin and Charles Hodge, a tradition which, despite his own rhetoric, he essentially accepted.¹¹⁴ Sometimes, however, he even dismissed that tradition as

110. *Ibid.*

111. For a survey of the older literature and the outdated characterizations of Protestant scholasticism see Carl R. Trueman and R. Scott Clark, eds., *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1999), xi–xix. See also W. J. van Asselt and Eef Dekker, eds., *Reformation and Scholasticism: An Ecumenical Enterprise* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 11–43; Willem J. van Asselt, “Protestant Scholasticism: Some Methodological Considerations in the Study of Its Development,” *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkengeschiedenis* 81 (2001): 265–74.

112. Basil Hall, “Calvin against the Calvinists,” in *John Calvin*, ed. Gervase Duffield (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966); R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979). John Frame was quite critical of Brian Armstrong’s version of the “Calvin versus the Calvinists” argument, but primarily on philosophical rather than historical grounds. See his review of Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth-Century France* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), in *WTJ* 34 (1972) and reprinted in John Frame, *The Doctrine of God: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 801–6. See also Richard Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1986).

113. E.g., Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), 168–98.

114. For example, in Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), one finds no reference to any of the orthodox Reformed theologians. In a chapter of idem, *Christianity and Barthianism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, reprint, 1977), 67–89, he surveys Barth’s critique of Reformed orthodoxy, but in his rebuttal, later in the volume, he moves from medieval to modern theology, omitting any discussion of Reformed

having been corrupted with Aristotelian ideas. For example, in describing Valentine Hepp's history of theology, Van Til said, "the epistemology of Voetius and many Reformed theologians was very similar to that of Thomas. They were unable to extricate themselves from the influence of modern philosophy which began with the assumption of the autonomy of the human spirit."¹¹⁵ There is no evidence in the discussion that follows, however, that Van Til disagreed with Hepp's analysis of the seventeenth-century Reformed theologians. Further, there is precious little evidence that Van Til's claim about Voetius was true.¹¹⁶

His negative assessment of Voetius was particularly ironic, since Voetius opposed Descartes' autonomous turn with the same degree of vehemence as Van Til did after him. Voetius opposed Descartes so completely that he was unable to see where it might be possible for confessional Reformed Christians to agree with Descartes on matters relating to astronomy or theories of blood circulation. In other words, the historical evidence is not that Voetius was a rationalist, but rather that he was, as it were, a proto-hyper-presuppositionalist. Voetius reasoned that if Descartes was wrong about first order issues (and he was), then he could not be trusted on penultimate issues. Van Til's approach produced another irony, that despite the adamant and voluminous criticism by Van Til of the Arminians, Amyraldians, and Barthians, he and many of his followers essentially agreed with the Arminian, Amyraldian, and Barthian critique of their own tradition, that classical Reformed theology had become "bogged down" in the "quagmire of rationalism."¹¹⁷

Because of such rhetoric, and because Van Til did not always use the traditional Reformed theological vocabulary, he inadvertently helped to

orthodoxy. In his syllabus, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, vol. 2 of *In Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, n.d.), 94–102, he moves from a discussion of Calvin's theology to Descartes.

115. Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, vol. 5 of *In Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978), 49.

116. See Aza Goudriaan, *Reformed Orthodoxy and Philosophy, 1625–1750: Gisbertus Voetius, Petrus Van Mastricht, and Anthonius Driessen*, ed. Wim Janse, *Church History* 26 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 37–53, which demonstrates positively that Voetius placed Scripture above human reason.

117. Gary North, "Introduction," in *Foundations of Christian Scholarship: Essays in the Van Til Perspective*, ed. Gary North (Vallecito, CA: Ross House, 1979), ix.

create an impression that he was doing something that had never been done before. His ruthless critiques of modernity and less consistent forms of Calvinism were invaluable, but in some ways at least, much of what Van Til did could be described as a restatement of the key ideas of classical Reformed theology. It would be unhistorical and anachronistic to impute the entirety of Van Til's presuppositional system to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed orthodoxy, but his insight regarding the Creator/creature distinction, which undergirded all his work, was an idea with which all the classical Reformed theologians operated.¹¹⁸ If presuppositionalism means beginning with the foundational submission to the authority of God and his revelation in Scripture over against human autonomy, hardly a single sixteenth- or seventeenth-century Reformed theologian, at least in the early and high orthodox periods, disagreed.

About the time Van Til's active academic career was ending, the tide began to turn in the academic literature. In the preface to the 1981 reprint of his book *Reformers in the Wings*, David Steinmetz disavowed his earlier "Calvin versus the Calvinists" interpretation of Theodore Beza and his relations to Calvin:

At the time I wrote on Theodore Beza, he was widely regarded as a speculative theologian who betrayed the insights of the Reformation by fitting them into the alien framework of Aristotelian philosophy. The more recent essays by Moruyama, Raitt, and particularly by Richard Muller have persuaded me that this view is not true and that the image of Beza in particular and of Protestant scholasticism in general need fundamental re-thinking and reinterpretation.¹¹⁹

Steinmetz's scholarship has continued in this trajectory of interpretation more recently by arguing that Calvin's relations to medieval scholasticism are much more complicated than usually acknowledged.¹²⁰ Certainly, with the publication of Richard Muller's work on Beza, the old caricature of

118. See chapter 4 of this work.

119. David C. Steinmetz, *Reformers in the Wings*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981).

120. Idem, "The Scholastic Calvin," in *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment*, ed. Carl R. Trueman and R. Scott Clark (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1999).

Beza and the Reformed orthodoxy and scholasticism can be repeated only through stubbornness or ignorance.¹²¹

Becoming familiar and friendly with our own tradition is an important part of recovering the Reformed confession. It is impossible to have the Reformation without orthodoxy, “if only because the intention to identify, present, and preserve Christian orthodoxy in and for the church lay at the very heart of the Reformation. The Reformation without orthodoxy is not the Reformation . . . the severing of piety from scholasticism is also untrue to the historical case.”¹²² The same men who wrote our theology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries also wrote our foundational books on piety. The idea that we can have the Reformation without the Reformed tradition is problematic. According to Muller, “In short, what is desperately wrong with such a project is that it offers us a mythical Reformation as the foundation of our tradition rather than the historical Reformation—and, in order to justify the myth, obscures the historical bridge that connects us to our genuine past.”¹²³

Far from being a detour, the confessional Reformed tradition offers us a useful and detailed road map toward *semper reformanda*. According to Muller, what we can learn from the classic Reformed theologians, for example, Peter Van Mastricht’s *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, is the practice of connecting sensitive exegesis of Holy Scripture to profound theological formulation.¹²⁴ From the successors of the classic Reformed theologians we can learn how to relate theology to new learning. For example, whatever one might think of Charles Hodge’s conclusions, one must marvel at his intelligent interaction with nineteenth-century science.¹²⁵ Muller also notes that the Southern Presbyterian theologian Robert Louis

121. For example, see Richard A. Muller, “The Use and Abuse of a Document: Beza’s *Tabula Praedestinationis*, the Bolsec Controversy, and the Origins of Reformed Orthodoxy,” in *Protestant Scholasticism*. One signal that the tide of opinion about Reformed scholasticism may be turning is the title of an essay by the Princeton theologian and Barth scholar, Bruce L. McCormack, “Confessions of a Reformed Scholastic,” *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought* 13 (June/July 1998): 12–14.

122. Muller, *Scholasticism and Orthodoxy in the Reformed Tradition*, 28.

123. *Ibid.*, 29.

124. Richard A. Muller, “Giving Direction to Theology: The Scholastic Dimension,” *JETS* 28 (1985): 184–85.

125. See Mark A. Noll and David N. Livingstone, eds., *Charles Hodge, What Is Darwinism? and Other Writings on Science and Religion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

Dabney (1820–98) developed his epistemology in dialogue with Berkeley, Hume, Kant, and Mill.¹²⁶ The confessional Reformed tradition provides a model for us as we seek to engage honestly and carefully the questions which we face in our time. “A scholastic method with its careful division of theology into Biblical, historical, systematic and practical theology may well be the best foundation upon which we can produce effective theological synthesis for our times.”¹²⁷

Conclusions

In this introduction I have tried to outline the central argument of this book, that all is not well in the Reformed churches, that they are fragmented, and to a remarkable degree have lost their identity. This loss of identity has occurred because the Reformed churches have been affected deeply by two alien impulses: the quest for illegitimate religious certainty (QIRC) and the quest for illegitimate religious experience (QIRE). Both of these impulses are variations on the two major aspects of the Enlightenment: rationalism and irrationalism. The antidote for these diseases is to recover the Reformed confession, that is, Reformed theology, piety, and practice. This part of the argument will be taken up at length in the next two chapters of this book.

The Reformed confession, considered narrowly, can be the only stable and reasonable definition of the adjective “Reformed.” As part of this argument, I have offered explanations for why we have come to such a place. Part of the solution is the recovery of a true understanding of *sola scriptura* and a recovery of the role and use of the Reformed tradition in defining our identity. This approach is in contrast to those who seek to perpetuate either the QIRC or the QIRE. It is to these two problems that the book now turns.

126. Muller, “Giving Direction to Theology,” 187.

127. Ibid., 193. See also Luco J. van den Brom, “Scholasticism and Contemporary Systematic Theology,” in *Reformation and Scholasticism: An Ecumenical Enterprise*, ed. Willem J. van Asselt and Eef Dekker (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).