

RECOVERING THE
REFORMED
CONFESSION

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RECOVERING THE
REFORMED
CONFESSION

Our Theology, Piety, and Practice

R. SCOTT CLARK


P U B L I S H I N G
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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
Creeds	<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
<i>LW</i>	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
<i>OED</i>	<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 Calvini 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
<i>PRRD</i>	Richard A. Muller. <i>Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy</i> ,

Abbreviations

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
Works	<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/naparc2/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 praeatores legitime vocatos annunciat in Ecclesia, credimus ipsum verbum accipiari 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. *Creeeds*, 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 Schleiermachiian 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 Melanchthon (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 Melanchthon* (Geneva: E. Droz, 1961). See also E. P. Meijering, *Melanchthon 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*.