

CHRISTIANITIES IN  
THE TRANS-ATLANTIC WORLD

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**ON BEING REFORMED**

Debates over a  
Theological Identity

**Matthew C. Bingham,  
Chris Caughey,  
R. Scott Clark,  
Crawford Gribben  
and D. G. Hart**



# Christianities in the Trans-Atlantic World

Series Editors  
Crawford Gribben  
Department of History  
Queen's University Belfast  
Belfast, UK

Scott Spurlock  
Department of Theology and Religious Studies  
University of Glasgow  
Glasgow, UK

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Matthew C. Bingham • Chris Caughey  
R. Scott Clark • Crawford Gribben  
D. G. Hart

# On Being Reformed

Debates over a Theological Identity

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macmillan

Matthew C. Bingham  
Systematic Theology and  
Church History  
Oak Hill College  
London, UK

R. Scott Clark  
Church History and Historical  
Theology  
Westminster Seminary California  
Escondido, CA, USA

Chris Caughey  
Queen's University Belfast  
Belfast, UK

Crawford Gribben  
Queen's University Belfast  
Belfast, UK

D. G. Hart  
Faculty of History, Hillsdale College  
Hillsdale, MI, USA

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Matthew C. Bingham** teaches systematic and historical theology at Oak Hill College, London, UK. He is the author of the forthcoming monograph *Orthodox Radicals: Baptist Identity in the English Revolution* (Oxford University Press).

**Chris Caughey** holds an M.Div. from Westminster Seminary, California, USA, and a Ph.D. from Trinity College Dublin, Ireland. He is the author of *The Tale of Two Adams* (2012), and articles and chapters in *Bunyan Studies* (2015) and *Prophecy and Eschatology in the Transatlantic World, 1500–1800*, ed. Andrew Crome (2016).

**R. Scott Clark** is Professor of Church History and Historical Theology at Westminster Seminary, California, USA, and the author of publications including *Caspar Olevian and the Substance of the Covenant: The Double Benefit of Christ* (2005) and *Recovering the Reformed Confession: Our Theology, Piety, and Practice* (2008).

**Crawford Gribben** is Professor of Early Modern British History at Queen's University, Belfast, UK, and the author of books including *John Owen and English Puritanism: Experiences of Defeat* (2016) and *God's Irishmen: Theological debates in Cromwellian Ireland* (2007).

**D. G. Hart** is Distinguished Visiting Professor of History at Hillsdale College, Michigan, USA, and the author of books including *Calvinism: A History* (2013), *From Billy Graham to Sarah Palin: Evangelicals and the Betrayal of American Conservatism* (2011), and *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (1994).



# History, Identity Politics, and the “Recovery of the Reformed Confession”

*Chris Caughey and Crawford Gribben*

**Abstract** Engaging with the arguments of Clark and Hart, this chapter explores the various ways in which some major Reformed confessions have changed over time. The authors ask whether it is possible for contemporary Protestants to be Reformed in the senses in which the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century ecclesiastical assemblies who drafted the original confessional documents—and the members of those churches—understood the term “Reformed.” The authors argue that if being Reformed in this way is not possible, then greater latitude ought to be extended to various contemporary groups which want to self-identify as Reformed.

**Keywords** Baptist • Presbyterian • Reformed • Puritanism • Early modern Britain • Historical theology

In March 2009, *TIME* magazine listed “the new Calvinism” as one of ten ideas “changing the world right now.”<sup>1</sup> It was, in many ways, the most

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<sup>1</sup>David Van Biema, “10 Ideas Changing the World Right Now: The New Calvinism,” *TIME*, March 12, 2009.

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C. Caughey (✉) • C. Gribben  
Queen’s University Belfast, Belfast, UK

significant indicator of the success of the resurgence of Reformed theology that began with the first publications of the Banner of Truth in the late 1950s and has continued more recently among the very different demographic of the “young, restless and Reformed.”<sup>2</sup> Fifty years ago, the Banner of Truth began republishing older classics in a marketplace in which Reformed theology seemed deeply unfashionable. But a number of books produced by the Trust encouraged readers to believe that the system of theology to which they had been attracted would one day be extraordinarily revived in popular appeal.<sup>3</sup> The readers of the Trust’s first publication, Thomas Watson’s *Body of Divinity* (reprinted 1958), could hardly have expected that the movement they were in many respects beginning would five decades later feature on the front cover of *TIME* magazine. It has—but many traditionally minded Reformed Protestants are now wondering whether the “new Calvinism” attracting this unprecedented media interest is in fact the revival of the true religion they had been encouraged to expect. Their difficulty is that “Calvinism” has evolved as it has gone mainstream, and, as even its advocates admit, the “new Calvinism” is quite different from the old. D. G. Hart has recognized that “Calvinism’s original leaders” could not have “predicted or planned the outcome of their initial efforts to reform Europe’s churches.”<sup>4</sup> For, as R. Scott Clark has noticed, “significant segments within the Reformed communion ... define ‘Reformed’ in ways our forefathers would not understand.”<sup>5</sup>

The resurgence of Reformed theology, and the revolution it has precipitated within the leadership of the movement, has sparked a series of religious turf wars. A number of the theologians have moved to defend more traditional articulations of orthodoxy, denying that the “new Calvinists” have the right to be identified as “Reformed.” The fact that the terms “Reformed” and

<sup>2</sup>John J. Murray, *Catch the Vision: Roots of the Reformed Recovery* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2007); Colin Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist’s Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008); J. Todd Billings, “Calvinism’s Comeback?” *Christian Century* 126:24 (1 December 2009), pp. 22–25; Josh Burek, “Christian Faith: Calvinism is back,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 27, 2010.

<sup>3</sup>See, most obviously, Iain H. Murray, *The Puritan Hope* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1970).

<sup>4</sup>D. G. Hart, *Calvinism: A history* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 304.

<sup>5</sup>R. Scott Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession: Our theology, piety, and practice* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), p. 4.

“Calvinist” are historically loaded is part of the challenge of this debate.<sup>6</sup> Some of those reacting have gone further, identifying themselves as the “truly” or “confessionally Reformed,” and attempting to police the boundaries of the “Reformed movement” to exclude from its ranks many of the most able and articulate defenders of Calvinistic soteriology, including John Piper, Mark Dever, and other members of such organizations as the Gospel Coalition. Their argument is simple—anyone who denies any element within the Reformed confessions cannot be regarded as “Reformed”—and it is directed most obviously against those Calvinists who are charismatics or who argue against the baptism of infants. So, these polemicists continue, the term “Reformed Baptist” is an oxymoron, however closely a baptistic believer may adhere to Calvin’s soteriological scheme or to an early modern theological symbol in which that soteriology might be embedded, such as the second London Baptist confession of faith (1677/1689). Noting that the “Calvinism” label denotes much more than soteriology, self-identified confessional conservatives have responded to the broader appropriation of “Reformed” identity with criticism and concern.

Part of the difficulty, of course, is that identity boundaries cannot effectively be policed. These charismatic or baptistic “Calvinists” are not the only Christians to insist that they share the “Reformed” identity with those who think it more properly their own. Even such “mixed” communions as the Christian Reformed Church, the Reformed Church in America, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Church of Scotland, and the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA) claim to be Reformed. For example, a search of the term “Reformed” on the PCUSA website yields 1780 results (though some of these results use the term to refer to the process of change rather than to the theology of the Protestant Reformation).<sup>7</sup> While their theological terminology is common, there is little doctrinal agreement between liberal or Barthian denominations and their broadly conservative “others”—whether the movement of the “young, restless and reformed,” or those historic or confessionally prescriptive Reformed and Presbyterian denominations, whose members critique the “young” and “restless.” Thus the descriptor “Reformed” has been drawn into a struggle related to broader concerns about religious identity politics in the contemporary United States. And yet the paradox of so much of this discussion is that many of those who are

<sup>6</sup>Willem J. van Asselt, “Calvinism as a problematic concept in historiography,” *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, 74:2 (2013), pp. 144–150.

<sup>7</sup><http://www.pcusa.org/search/?criteria=reformed>, accessed on July 1, 2014.

most vocal in denying the title of “Reformed” to the “young,” the “restless,” the “liberal,” and the “Barthian” are operating with a definition of “Reformed” that is itself both a-historical and geographically specific, and that may, consequently, beg the question of what “confessional” actually means. The “truly Reformed” require their “others” to measure themselves against the body of creeds produced during and immediately after the Reformation. But, as we will argue in this chapter, these standards may provide an unstable foundation for a contemporary “Reformed” identity, for these texts were first published as competing statements of faith, and some of them have been so radically revised as to now exist in multiple and contradictory versions, the most advanced of which move their modern subscribers into theological territories that their original subscribers would have regarded as “Anabaptist.” The “new Calvinism,” as its advocates admit, is quite different from the old—just as the old Calvinism differed from the much older Calvinism it also once replaced, and by which, for similar reasons, it might also have been rejected.

## I

It is our contention that the recent attempt to recover “the Reformed confession” as part of the broader articulation and defense of “Calvinism” has been both necessary and problematic. The difficulty relates in part to trends in historiography, in which older models of confessionalization, which focused on German territories and were most famously expounded by Wolfgang Reinhard and Heinz Schilling, have given way to geographically broader and more troubled reconstructions of early modern religious change within “anti-papal Latin Christianity” that pay closer attention to the phenomenon of religious radicalism.<sup>8</sup> Part of the difficulty, as Alec Ryrie has recently noted, is that Lutherans and the Reformed adopted very different attitudes to the confessions of faith that they published. While “Lutheranism in the age of orthodoxy was ... precisely ... a Confession, with its principal spiritual parameters defined at Augsburg in 1530 and its legal parameters at the same city in 1555,” there “was never

<sup>8</sup> Heinz Schilling, “Confessional Europe,” in Thomas Brady Jr., Heiko A. Oberman, and James D. Tracy (eds), *Handbook of European history, 1400–1600*, Vol. 2, *Late Middle Ages, Renaissance and Reformation* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), pp. 641–675; Wolfgang Reinhard, “Pressures towards confessionalization? Prolegomena to a theory of the confessional age,” in C. Scott Dixon (ed.), *The German Reformation* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 177–178; Alec Ryrie, “‘Protestantism’ as a historical category,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, sixth series, XXVI (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 59–77, pp. 60, 65; van Asselt, “Calvinism as a problematic concept in historiography,” pp. 147–148.

a single Reformed confession of faith,” and attempts to create a “single, harmonised” confession always failed.<sup>9</sup> This did not “prevent the Reformed family from recognising one another as brethren,” partly because “their confessions were understood to be limited, provisional documents, subject to revision and improvement,” with similar, though not identical, emphases.<sup>10</sup> Calvinism, Ryrie has concluded, “should be seen not as a unified ‘confession’ in any strict sense, but as an ecumenical movement for Protestant unity,” which was “broad, discursive and dangerously soft-edged,” with a tendency to “leak into radicalism” in territories where Reformed ideas did not enjoy strong state support.<sup>11</sup> For, as Willem van Asselt has similarly argued, “there was not one, but several trajectories” within early modern Reformed thought, “a whole series of Reformed theologies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.”<sup>12</sup> And so, he continues, the “Reformed tradition is to be examined on its own terms, and to be considered against the backdrop of its own historical and theological context,”<sup>13</sup> for if we fail to remember the “variety and breadth of the later Reformed tradition,” we may not “do justice to historical phenomena.”<sup>14</sup> Our definition of “Calvinism” should not reduce a complex and variegated phenomenon to a “kind of uniform and even ideological movement ... to legitimize the present position of the historian or theologian.”<sup>15</sup> For, as John Leith famously put it, the Reformed churches were “prolific in the production of creeds”—he refers to around 60 such examples—and these creeds “exhibit a variety that is the nemesis of all those who would write the theology of the Reformed confessions.”<sup>16</sup>

In this chapter, we argue that the recent attempt to “recover the Reformed confession” and its broader ecclesial significance has not paid sufficient attention to this historical reality, nor to its contemporary implications. One of the most common assumptions in the literature discussing the question of nomenclature is that “Reformed,” when it appears in the title of a congregation, denomination, or institution, has a stable meaning,

<sup>9</sup> Ryrie, “‘Protestantism’ as a historical category,” pp. 66–67.

<sup>10</sup> Ryrie, “‘Protestantism’ as a historical category,” p. 66.

<sup>11</sup> Ryrie, “‘Protestantism’ as a historical category,” pp. 67, 72.

<sup>12</sup> van Asselt, “Calvinism as a problematic concept in historiography,” p. 147.

<sup>13</sup> van Asselt, “Calvinism as a problematic concept in historiography,” p. 146.

<sup>14</sup> van Asselt, “Calvinism as a problematic concept in historiography,” p. 148.

<sup>15</sup> van Asselt, “Calvinism as a problematic concept in historiography,” p. 148.

<sup>16</sup> John Leith, *Creeds of the churches: A reader in Christian doctrine from the Bible to the present* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), p. 127.

which refers to an allegiance to that part of the Protestant tradition that traces its intellectual and spiritual origins to the theology of John Calvin, or, often more accurately, to a combination of his theology, anthropology, and soteriology with the ecclesiological experiments of John Knox and the advanced covenant theology and sometimes (but, controversially, not always) the experiential emphasis of seventeenth-century English and Dutch puritans. But this is not always the case: the “Reformed” descriptor does not always precisely refer to this body of knowledge. The United Societies of Scottish Covenanters that formed the Reformed Presbytery in 1743, for example, adopted the label “Reformed” not to indicate that their ministers were Calvinistic—this hardly being distinctive in the Scotland of the mid-eighteenth century—but to indicate that they were “re-forming” in the sense of re-establishing a national church for Scotland on the basis of a renewed commitment to the Solemn League and Covenant and other denominationally particular documents.<sup>17</sup> This instance is a useful reminder that the “Reformed” tradition does allow for the use of this descriptor to indicate something other than a commitment to a specific set of early modern confessional texts.

Neither can “Reformed” be effectively defined in relation to the creeds and confessions of faith produced during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>18</sup> First, despite the widespread use of the definite article, as Ryrie has noted, there is no single “Reformed confession.”<sup>19</sup> It is true that any intertextual comparison of various Reformed confessions, such as that edited by Peter Hall in the mid-nineteenth century, will demonstrate a vast amount of agreement.<sup>20</sup> There can be surprising omissions: the *Scots Confession* (1560), for example, does not refer to the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Agreement does exist on such loci as Holy Scripture, the Trinity, predestination, creation *ex nihilo*, original sin, atonement,

<sup>17</sup> *The Act, Declaration and Testimony* (1761) does not specifically mention the reason for adopting the name “Reformed Presbyterian,” but the introduction indicates the subscribers were preparing a Testimony for the true, covenanted, and re-established national kirk. “This designation (Reformed Presbytery) they assumed as expressive of their attachment to the Reformation cause, and of their desire, through divine aid, to contend for all those scriptural attainments, both in Church and State, to which these nations were so solemnly pledged”; *Historical Testimony* (1831). The authors are grateful to Dr. Daniel Ritchie (University College Dublin) and Dr. Thomas Donachie (Queen’s University Belfast) for advice on Reformed Presbyterian history.

<sup>18</sup> As in, for example, Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession*, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Ryrie, “‘Protestantism’ as a historical category,” pp. 66–67.

<sup>20</sup> *The harmony of protestant confessions*, ed. Peter Hall (London: John F. Shaw, 1842).

justification, sanctification, the sacraments, and the civil magistrate. Yet, in early modernity, these similarities were not expressed in a single statement of faith: there were, and still are, many Reformed confessions, and in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries these confessions to some extent competed with each other. When the divines in the Jerusalem Chamber abandoned their attempt to improve the 39 Articles, they did not simply adopt one of the better Continental alternatives, or even the Irish Articles (1615) that had provided the doctrinal basis for an earlier and more proximate Reformed church. Instead, the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) which they published in some sense competed with the Three Forms of Unity (1619), encoding different emphases and sometimes contradictory perspectives within a broadly similar theological tradition and in a context of mutual ecclesiastical respect. English and Dutch Protestants adopted different confessions because, in their distinctive intellectual, cultural, and political situations, they wanted to confess different things.

Of course, over the centuries, some of these confessions have themselves been revised. Modern subscribers need not only choose between the competing demands of the Westminster Confession and the Three Forms of Unity, but must also choose to which of the competing versions of the Westminster Confession or the Three Forms they will submit. The competition between editions is notorious in the Westminster tradition. The original text of the Confession, published in 1647 with the approval of the English Parliament, was only partially adopted as the national confessional basis of the established Church of England.<sup>21</sup> It was almost immediately adopted in its entirety—though with significant qualifications—by the Church of Scotland. The act approving the adoption of the Westminster Confession, passed by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland on August 27, 1647, described the confession as being “most agreeable to the word of God, and in nothing contrary to the received doctrine, worship, discipline, and government of this Kirk.” But the act immediately clarified this claim. “Lest our intention and meaning be in some particulars misunderstood,” it continued, some parts of the confession should be understood as incomplete but better understood in light of the Directory of Government, and other parts should be understood as only being true in extraordinary situations:

<sup>21</sup>William A. Shaw, *A history of the English Church during the Civil Wars and under the Commonwealth, 1640–1660* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1900), vol. 1, pp. 365–372.

it is hereby expressly declared and provided, That the not mentioning in this Confession the several sorts of ecclesiastical officers and assemblies, shall be no prejudice to the truth of Christ in these particulars, to be expressed fully in the Directory of Government. It is further declared, That the Assembly understandeth some parts of the second article of the thirty-one chapter only of kirks not settled, or constituted in point of government: And that although, in such kirks, a synod of Ministers, and other fit persons, may be called by the Magistrate's authority and nomination, without any other call, to consult and advise with about matters of religion; and although, likewise, the Ministers of Christ, without delegation from their churches, may of themselves, and by virtue of their office, meet together synodically in such kirks not yet constituted, yet neither of these ought to be done in kirks constituted and settled; it being always free to the Magistrate to advise with synods of Ministers and Ruling Elders, meeting upon delegation from their churches, either ordinarily, or, being indicted by his authority, occasionally, and pro re nata; it being also free to assemble together synodically, as well pro re nata as at the ordinary times, upon delegation from the churches, by the intrinical power received from Christ, as often as it is necessary for the good of the Church so to assemble, in case the Magistrate, to the detriment of the Church, withhold or deny his consent; the necessity of occasional assemblies being first remonstrated unto him by humble supplication.<sup>22</sup>

These qualifications became a standard position in the Scottish Presbyterian tradition. The effect was to admit that while the Directory of Government was a Presbyterian document, the Westminster Confession was not: only by adding the Directory to the Confession could the publications of the Westminster Assembly be considered Presbyterian. But there was no qualification of the confession's determination that those who published opinions or maintained practices that were "contrary to the light of Nature, or to the known Principles of Christianity ... may lawfully be called to account, and proceeded against by the Censures of the Church, and by the Power of the Civil Magistrate" (WCF 20: 4). The proof texts included citations for capital crime, including Deuteronomy 13:6–12 and 2 Kings 23:20. These penalties were taken at face value. Several months after the publication of the confession, Presbyterian MPs supporting the work of the Assembly passed their Blasphemy Act (1648), which specified death and imprisonment for the articulation of ideas that have become modern evangelical commonplaces.

<sup>22</sup> Act approving the Confession of Faith, session 23, 27 August 1647, as reprinted in *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (n.p.: Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1967), p. 15.

The text which the Scottish Church received with such substantial qualification in 1647 was more thoroughly revised by American Presbyterians in 1788:

The Synod took into consideration the last paragraph of the twentieth chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith; the third paragraph of the twenty-third chapter; and the first paragraph of the thirty-first chapter; and having made some alterations, agreed that the said paragraphs, as now altered, be printed for consideration, together with the draught of a plan of government and discipline. ... And the Synod agreed, that when the above proposed alterations in the Confession of Faith shall have been finally determined on by the body, and the Directory shall have been revised as above directed, and adopted by the Synod, the said Confession thus altered, and Directory thus revised and adopted, shall be styled, “The Confession of Faith, and Directory for public worship, of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.”<sup>23</sup>

The effect of the American revisions, as is well known, was to entirely repudiate some of the convictions of Scottish Presbyterians—and, indeed, of the Westminster Assembly itself.<sup>24</sup> In particular, the revision denied the original confession’s claim that civil magistrates had the responsibility to resist those who opposed “any lawful power ... civil or ecclesiastical” (WCF 20: 4) and repudiated the assumption that the civil magistrate should intervene in the affairs of the church in order to preserve its unity, peace, and orthodoxy—a conviction that has, happily, largely prevented the American churches from following their ecclesiastical cousins elsewhere into secular arbitration.<sup>25</sup> And despite the formal restyling of the confession as “The Confession of Faith, and Directory for Public Worship, of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America,” the minutes of the 1789 Synod indicate that American Presbyterians continued to refer to the radically revised text as “the Westminster Confession of Faith.”

The Confession has gone through further American recensions, most notably in 1903, when the PCUSA added material on the Holy Spirit and missions and no longer required subscribers to believe that the Pope was antichrist or emphatically to affirm the doctrine of election. But the

<sup>23</sup> *Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1706–1788* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), pp. 539, 546–547.

<sup>24</sup> Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession*, p. 165.

<sup>25</sup> WCF 20:4 (Scottish text); WCF 23:3 (Scottish text).

situation has since become more confusing. In addition to these four principal editions—the text as produced by the Westminster Assembly of Divines and used in part as the quasi-legal basis of the English National Church during the late 1640s (April 1647), the text as adopted with qualifications by the Church of Scotland (August 1647), the text as revised by the American Church (1788), and the text as more substantially revised by the PCUSA (1903)—other denominations plot their own course through a vast array of possible emendations while still referring to their creedal statement as “the Westminster Confession of Faith.” Perhaps most honestly of all, the website of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church guides readers through this history of emendations and indicates how its own confessional position relates to these earlier recensions, admitting its adoption of only “some” of the revisions made by the American Presbyterian Church in 1903.<sup>26</sup> For all its candor, this denominational website effectively publicizes the problem: there are now so many ways for contemporary Presbyterian churches to receive the Westminster Confession of Faith that we cannot be sure what a so-called confessional commitment actually amounts to—except that the confessing church is almost certainly not receiving the text that was produced by the Westminster Assembly of Divines in April 1647 and used by the English National Church, nor that adopted with qualifications by the Church of Scotland later the same summer. We do not believe, as Scott Clark has argued, that “it is the nominalistic spirit of our age that suggests that it is misleading to speak of *the* Reformed confession, or *the* Reformed theology, piety, and practice.”<sup>27</sup> Instead, as this survey of the evolution of the Westminster Confession indicates, there are many competing Reformed confessions—and many competing editions of one of their most influential representatives. Even within the transatlantic Presbyterian tradition, there is no single confession to recover—and the problem is magnified when other traditions with roots in the Calvinist Reformation are also considered. The confessions provide a very limited theological foundation for contemporary discussions that search for a stable definition of “Reformed.”

Of course, some of the most vigorous advocates of the recovery of “the Reformed confession”—the so-called “truly Reformed”—do not find the confessions exhaustive in terms of constructing their polemical identity.

<sup>26</sup> [http://www.opc.org/documents/WCF\\_orig.html](http://www.opc.org/documents/WCF_orig.html), accessed July 1, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession*, p. 28.

Some conservative Protestants adopt the practices as well as the published body of divinity of the early modern Reformed churches. “Truly Reformed” polemicists often argue for exclusive psalmody, for example, which they represent as the universal practice of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed churches, and a central component of “Reformed” identity, despite the fact that exclusive and unaccompanied psalm-singing is not required by any Protestant confessional document.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, few of the “truly Reformed” are willing to embrace the species of Erastianism—or, at least, the lack of distinction between cult and culture—that was enshrined in nearly every early modern Reformed confession.<sup>29</sup> This combination of selective confession, historical revision, and rhetorical repristination presents problems for those who want to claim the mantle of being “truly Reformed.” Contemporary Reformed Protestants do not appear to share a principled approach to the adoption of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed practice: though it is likely that almost every early modern Reformed Christian defended both exclusive psalm-singing and civil disobedience, the “truly Reformed” tend to accept the former while denying the latter, so that only certain aspects of the heritage they claim become normative for their contemporary faith and practice.<sup>30</sup> If one of the Reformed criticisms of evangelicalism is that it is activist rather than confessional, then perhaps contemporary confessional Reformed Christians are more like evangelicals than they think. If what Reformed Christians do is at least as important as what they believe, then they must be aware of the authority for their actions. If that authority is the practice of Reformed Christians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, then they must have reason to explain why they follow one unanimous practice from early modernity and not another. The Reformed confessions, with their variety, occasional contradiction, and limited contribution to the construction of a “truly Reformed” identity, may not be able to help.

<sup>28</sup> It is, arguably, implied in the WCF.

<sup>29</sup> This is borne out in James T. Dennison’s *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th centuries in English translation: Volume 1, 1523–1552, volume 2, 1552–1566 and volume 3, 1567–1599* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Heritage Books, 2008, 2010, 2012).

<sup>30</sup> Darryl G. Hart, “J. Gresham Machen, Inerrancy and Creedless Christianity,” *Themelios* 25:3 (2000), 24; idem, *A Secular Faith: Why Christianity Favors The Separation of Church and State* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), p. 221. Clark has argued that theonomy represents a “profound alienation from our confession,” even though its modification and slight extension of the confession’s view of civil government is much less radical than the abandonment of its claims by the “truly Reformed”; Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession*, p. 63.

## II

The textual instability of the tradition of Protestant symbols is a problem even in R. Scott Clark's attempt to recover "the Reformed confession" and D. G. Hart's account of its ecclesiastical use in his history of "Calvinism." We have chosen to focus this part of our chapter on these recent interventions because we recognize Clark and Hart as being among the wisest, most persuasive, and successful defenders of the position we wish to interrogate, and because their influential publications settle upon stable definitions of "Reformed" and "Calvinism" against which we wish to appeal. Clark's polemical work draws on his expertise in the complex world of Reformation theology, and is perhaps best expressed in his justly applauded contribution, *Recovering the Reformed Confession* (2008). His historical transparency recognizes that the early modern Reformed confession merged cult and culture in a way that he cannot countenance: he is not the only North American Reformed Christian who cannot abide the idea that the civil magistrate is responsible for using the sword to suppress heresy and blasphemy as well as to promote the preaching of the Gospel and the right use of the sacraments (and the present authors share his concerns on this point). Hart's magisterial history of *Calvinism* (2013) is organized around its subject as a "set of religious institutions" from which Anabaptists are consistently expelled: on the one hand, Hart recognizes that up to 5000 Anabaptists may have been killed for their faith during the first century of the Reformation, while on the other, he omits from his record the most widely published Calvinists of the modern era, from the Victorian pulpiteer, C. H. Spurgeon, to the "young" and "restless" exponents of "new Calvinism" on social media.<sup>31</sup> In their acute and astute contributions, Clark and Hart root their expositions of "Reformed" and "Calvinist" identity in definitions and habits of thought that we wish to reconsider.

Even in the writings of its principal defenders, therefore, the question of the religious duty of the civil magistrate exposes the limits of the "recovery of the Reformed confession." Across the board, as we have seen, the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestant confessions maintained a position on government that has been disclaimed by many, if not most, contemporary Reformed Christians. The confessions agreed that civil government did have a religious duty, and that the details of that duty were to

<sup>31</sup> Hart, *Calvinism*, pp. 9–10.

be found in Scripture. But over the course of the last several centuries, many Reformed communions, especially in North America, have moved away from this vision of religiously responsible government to embrace a variant of “two kingdoms” theology, which argues that the civil magistrate should be guided by general revelation while the church should be governed by Scripture.<sup>32</sup> Our intention is neither to evaluate the plausibility of that argument nor to argue that Reformation Protestants also used the language of “two kingdoms” while understanding both kingdoms to be governed by Scripture.<sup>33</sup> We wish merely to note that the best-informed and most able exponents of the “recovery of the Reformed confession” recognize that this is not an aspect of their theological heritage that they wish to see revived. Any appeal to a modern revision of a Reformation confession as a more authoritative statement simply begs the question—even if its text has been ecclesiastically approved. As we have argued, there now exist multiple and competing editions of the Westminster Confession of Faith, in which competing denominations present competing accounts of Christian faith, and competing relationships to the ideals of the Calvinist Reformation. The common tendency to elide early modern expectations of civil government indicates that elements of Reformation aspiration appear to be beyond recovery.

Clark’s argument recognizes the distance between the convictions of contemporary “Reformed” Christians and the content of the theological symbols upon which their identity has been constructed. But he has also argued for a solution to this difficulty, claiming that modern churches may receive early modern confessions while not subscribing to those elements of their content that they regard as unbiblical.<sup>34</sup> But this gets to the heart of the problem. If the confessions as crafted in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are the benchmark of orthodoxy, then Reformed churches should not receive anything else. After all, the original authors of the confessions did not write esoteric or negotiable doctrines into their

<sup>32</sup> See especially Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom prologue* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), and idem, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972); David VanDrunen’s many works on natural law and the two kingdoms, including *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), and idem, *Living in God’s two kingdoms: A Biblical vision for Christianity and culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

<sup>33</sup> Crawford Gribben, “Samuel Rutherford and liberty of conscience,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 71:2 (2009), pp. 355–373.

<sup>34</sup> Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession*, p. 10.

confessions—and a departure from those original confessions would not have been viewed by the original authors as orthodox. However, if Reformed churches have changed their confession based on careful deliberation and debate over the Scriptures, then the simplest solution would be to confess their faith anew. This would avoid the unhappy circumstance of possessing a confession which says more than its confessors want to say—a confession that some church officers could use to tyrannize those with whom they disagree.

The Westminster standards are not the only confessional documents to pose a dilemma for “truly Reformed” Christians. In the Belgic Confession, Guido de Bres included a doctrinal formulation that runs counter to the received orthodoxy of the Reformed churches. In Article 24, on “The Sanctification of Sinners,” de Bres confessed that faith causes regeneration, an *ordo salutis* that other Reformed confessions have reversed, placing regeneration before faith. This contradiction has compelled expositors of Reformed tradition to explain that English and Dutch Protestants had entirely different definitions for this key theological term: one difference is resolved by proposing another.<sup>35</sup> Less open to negotiation, however, is Article 4 of the Belgic Confession, on the “Canonical Books of the Holy Scripture,” which confesses that Paul wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews, a claim that would not now be widely upheld. Thus, those contemporary, continental Reformed who believe that regeneration precedes faith, and who believe that someone other than Paul wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews, cannot confess without qualification the symbol upon which their identity is based. Like the vast majority of subscribing Presbyterians, they too are unable to fully recover their Reformed confession.

The inability of Reformed believers to publicly confess their faith with the earliest texts of the Westminster Confession or the Belgic Confession represents more than the evolution of theological ideas or the progress of interpretation. Early modern Protestants were not in the habit of confessing esoteric doctrines, or carelessly adding to their public bodies of divinity. They did not include in their confessions doctrines that they considered to be marginal, negotiable, or extraneous. This observation applies as much to the original Reformed doctrine of the civil magistrate as it does to other Reformed doctrines such as baptism, the divine covenants, and church membership. The authors of the Reformed confessions included the doctrine that the civil magistrate has a duty to use the sword both for

<sup>35</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic theology* (1939; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1958), p. 466.

those inside the Reformed church as well as against those outside the Reformed church because they believed that this was the substance of biblical teaching, and because they believed that anyone bearing the descriptor of “Reformed” should agree with that claim. These texts could adopt a neutral silence on matters that later generations would regard as being central—for example, double imputation in justification—but their convictions about the civil magistrate were too significant to be omitted. The confessions illustrate an economy of language and of ideas. The only doctrines that were included in the Reformed confessions were those that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestants believed were necessary for the faith and practice of their churches. Their confessions codified “Reformed” theology and defined “Reformed” identity by marking the boundaries, as well as the centers, of their movements.

Of course, there were contextual reasons why early modern Protestants did want to confess that the state had responsibility under divine law. On the Continent, Protestant monarchs enforced Reformation with the sword. Adherents of their state churches could comfortably focus on the external means of grace, namely, the preaching of the gospel and the sacraments. The situation was entirely different in England, where, as Hart has noted, puritans turned inward in frustration with Queen Elizabeth, who did not want to go as far as they did in reforming the Church of England.<sup>36</sup> This frustration presupposed a blending of cult and culture that most modern Reformed would not abide by. Most puritans took for granted that the civil magistrate ought to have cultic duties, and, as a result, any attempt at furthering Reformation in England involved a struggle against the civil magistrate. No doubt many puritans wished for the situation of their sixteenth-century forbears on the European continent, where Calvinist princes enforced the Reformation with the sword. They expressed that frustration most forcibly, and effectively, at the Westminster Assembly, where, in the midst of a war against the king, the divines outlined the religious duties of the civil magistrate.

In twenty-first-century America, at least two things are different: most Reformed do not believe that the State has cultic responsibilities, and not only is there no established church, but most civil magistrates are not

<sup>36</sup> Darryl G. Hart, *Calvinism: A history* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 83–90. See also T.D. Bozeman, *The precisianist strain: Disciplinary religion and antinomian backlash in Puritanism to 1638* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), pp. 64–68, for more detail on this inward, pietistic turn.

interested in having any cultic duties as part of their job description. Thus, to the extent that the American Reformed are engaged in reforming the Church, they do not need the State's permission, and as a result, no struggle is necessary. But, according to their confessions, they ought to expect such a struggle. If "truly Reformed" Christians wish to contradict this, they must establish either that the common doctrine of the civil magistrate is not essential to the Reformed confessions, or that the early modern Reformed Christians would have responded to the American situation more like Roger Williams or David VanDrunen than John Cotton or Greg Bahnsen. Despite Clark's persuasive and wise arguments to the contrary, therefore, there is no possibility of recovering this aspect of the Reformed confession.

### III

As we have argued, this attempt to recover "the Reformed confession" stumbles over the fact that few of those who believe themselves to be its modern-day adherents would be prepared to sign the first editions of any of its theological symbols. Neither the "new Calvinists" nor the "truly Reformed" who interrogate them could adopt without qualification any one of the sixteenth- or seventeenth-century "Reformed" confessions. Guido de Bres, the author of the *Belgic Confession*, could not understand either party as subscribing to his statement of faith, and so would deny both parties the identity of "Reformed," and would hardly be happy with either party pretending otherwise. Had he the benefit of anticipating seventeenth-century theological development, he might also point to an irony of the "truly Reformed" position—that being "truly Reformed" is much closer to the historic Particular Baptist confessional position (1677/1689) than those who claim this label might be prepared to admit.

Many of those "confessionalists" who are pushing back on "new Calvinist" claims to Reformed identity advocate a number of key theological ideas that do not exist in the sixteenth- or seventeenth-century confessions they praise. These clarifications—sharpening the doctrines of imputation and justification, the covenant of redemption, as well as the non-sacral role of civil government—are not present in the Westminster Confession, but come together as a package for the first time in the second London Baptist confession of faith (1677/1689). Nevertheless, while, according to "truly Reformed" advocates, these ideas are part of the recovery of "the Reformed confession," the statement of faith in which they were first packaged is not. This Baptist confession might be a more

reliable guide to the faith of the “truly Reformed” than is the first edition of the Westminster Confession of Faith.

Therefore, while the Westminster standards and the Three Forms of Unity summarize the interpretation of Scripture of the first several generations of Reformed Protestants, they no longer accurately summarize what most contemporary Reformed and Presbyterians believe the Bible teaches. So whereas Calvin, Ursinus, Olevianus, de Bres, the Synod of Dort, and the divines at the Westminster Assembly would all have considered a denial of the cultic duties of the civil magistrate to be a hallmark of Anabaptist faith—according to their creedal statements—the majority report among North American Reformed and Presbyterians is that something closer to the Anabaptist doctrine of the civil magistrate is true and the corresponding Reformed doctrine is false. And yet, as Clark observes, there are currently two methods of confessional subscription practiced in Reformed and Presbyterian churches today: *quatenus* (i.e., agreement with the confessional standards *in so far as* they accurately summarize the Scriptures) and *quia* (i.e., agreement with the confessional standards *because* they accurately summarize the Scriptures)—with *quia* subscription being the historic practice of Reformed and Presbyterian churches.<sup>37</sup> This observation exposes the difficulty of policing the boundaries of what it means to be Reformed and the inconsistency of those who would play the policeman: they deny Reformed identity to some of its claimants (e.g., Reformed Baptists) whose confession encodes elements which the “truly Reformed” would wish to see in their own “Reformed confession,” and affirm the Reformed identity of other claimants in whose confession these elements are not included.

For confessional traditions are peculiar things. If they are measured by their self-identified adherents, promoters, or exponents, they permit a vast array of doctrinal commitments. For example, views approximating the Federal Vision, universal atonement, baptismal regeneration, and civil disobedience may be considered “truly Reformed,” since various figures from the history of Reformed churches and councils have held these, and other, exceptional views. On the other hand, if confessional traditions are measured by the precise language of the original sixteenth- and seventeenth-century confessional documents, then perhaps only theonomists and extreme neo-Calvinists may be considered “truly Reformed.”<sup>38</sup> And perhaps

<sup>37</sup> Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession*, p. 163.

<sup>38</sup> The adjective “extreme” was chosen over “radical,” because the etymology of the latter refers to the roots of something. Yet, if the original neo-Calvinist, Abraham Kuyper, was willing to give up the label Reformed in order to believe and teach that heretics should not be

the modern confessional revisions are not “Reformed” either. The philosophical problem of relative identity applies to the Reformed confessions at this point. To use the example of the ship of Theseus: if the constituent parts of a ship were replaced bit by bit, the question arises as to when the current ship ceases to be the true, original ship. In a similar way, if a particular Reformed confession were modified bit by bit over time, then at what point would it cease to be the original Reformed confession? We maintain a more Butlerian position in this chapter, arguing that a particular Reformed confession would retain its identity only if a modification resulted in the same meaning connoted by the original confession.<sup>39</sup> However, in the case of the theology of the civil magistrate, the second London Baptist confession of faith (1677/1689) made a radical departure from the Westminster Confession on which it was modeled. With Paul, the Baptists of London confessed only that the magistrate bears the sword “for defence and encouragement of them that do good, and for the punishment of evil doers” (24:1), when, without any qualification, “doing good” could be providing for one’s family or helping an infirm neighbor, while “doing evil” might refer to murder or theft. All of these examples are a far cry from Westminster’s conception of the magistrate’s use of the sword to preserve unity and peace in the Church, keep the truth of God pure and entire, ensure that all the ordinances of God be duly settled, administered, and observed, and to call Synods; or, conversely, to suppress all blasphemies and heresies, as well as to prevent all corruptions and abuses in worship and church discipline (WCF 23:3). Yet, while the American Presbyterian revision of 1788 did not go as far as the second confession of the London Baptists (1677/1689), it did substantially alter WCF 23:3 by confessing that the magistrate was to protect all Christian churches without preference or prejudice. The meaning of both the Baptist and the American Presbyterian confessional statements regarding the civil magistrate are not the same as the Westminster Confession of 1647. Therefore, they are not identical confessions, but are essentially different.

To further complicate matters, the position of the 1677/1689 Baptists and most contemporary American Reformed and Presbyterians on the

put to death by the State, then neo-Calvinists such as Nelson Kloosterman must be identified in some other way, since he argues that contemporary advocates of two kingdoms theology are not Reformed because they do not subscribe to Article 36 of the Belgic Confession.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph Butler (1692–1752), a Presbyterian-turned-English Bishop, denied that ordinary objects ever survived change.

issue of the civil magistrate would have been regarded by the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed as amounting to not only an Anabaptist state, but an antinomian state. One need only read Robert Baillie’s *Anabaptism, the true fountaine of Independency, Brownisme, Antinomy, Familisme* (1647), Thomas Edwards’ *Gangraena* (1646), and Samuel Rutherford’s *A Survey of the Spiritual Antichrist* (1648) to see that some of the louder puritan voices equated a state that does not punish sin with an antinomian state.<sup>40</sup> These English and Scottish Presbyterians would have condemned both the London Baptists and the American Presbyterians as anti-confessional—just like their modern descendants.

Of course, we are not the first to notice this problem. Abraham Kuyper famously stated that he was prepared to be mocked as un-Reformed rather than to subscribe to the Constantinian language of Article 36 of the Belgic Confession: “We would rather be considered not Reformed and insist that men ought not to kill heretics, than that we are left with the Reformed name as the prize for assisting in the shedding of the blood of heretics.”<sup>41</sup> If the Reformed confessions are the normative interpretation of the Scriptures, it would seem that Kuyper’s statements about Belgic 36 would require us to excommunicate him as having departed from the Reformation for the Radical Reformation. However, if the Particular Baptists were on the right track by paring the chapter on the civil magistrate down to essentially only a repetition of Romans 13—and if men like Abraham Kuyper, Meredith Kline, and David VanDrunen can be allowed to make exegetical, theological, and historical arguments that distinguish between cult and culture much more than did the early modern Reformed—then perhaps it is time to be honest about who the Reformed were, what the Reformed believed, and to recognize that we have only partially shared in their legacy, while being modest and charitable about our own confessions and our own confessional identities. And, perhaps, it

<sup>40</sup>In Rutherford, see pp. b4, 30–31, 99–100, 189–191. The reasoning behind the claim that any rejection of religious duties for the civil magistrate would have amounted to an Anabaptist state, was the close connection in these anti-antinomian puritans’ minds between antinomianism and Anabaptism. And given the widespread puritan belief that Anabaptists believed and practiced “anarchy,” the conclusion followed for most puritans that only Anabaptists would have held such an antinomian view of the civil magistrate as the contemporary American Presbyterian and Reformed do.

<sup>41</sup>Abraham Kuyper, “A Pamphlet Concerning the Reformation of the Church,” *The Standard Bearer* 62, no. 15 (1986): 342. See <http://standardbearer.rfpa.org/sites/default/files/1986-05-01.pdf>.

is time to admit that we—wherever we are on the spectrum between “new Calvinists” and the “confessionally Reformed”—may have more in common with the Particular Baptists of the seventeenth century than the architects of Reformed identity in the century before them.

#### IV

So what does “Reformed” mean? And who is allowed to use the label? We believe there are solutions to this theological, ecclesiological, and sociological problem. We suggest that “Reformed” refers to the confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in their original forms, and we recognize that there are now several distinct groups of theological positions which have descended from these texts, sometimes in incompatible ways. We can imagine these relationships as a theological family tree. In the present situation, Party A moves from the original text of the confessions to adopt one aspect of sixteenth-century Anabaptist or seventeenth-century Particular Baptist belief (e.g., on civil government), and allows itself to retain and even monopolize the label “Reformed.” At the same time, Party B moves from the original text to adopt a different aspect of sixteenth-century Anabaptist or seventeenth-century Particular Baptist belief (e.g., on the proper subjects of baptism), and the members of Party A deny them the right to do so. Party A—which may be constituted of conservative American Presbyterians—has revised some of the original confessions, but has added nothing substantial to the confessional legacy (leaving aside the issue of the additional material on the Spirit and eschatology in some American editions of the Westminster Confession of Faith). Party B—which may be constituted of “Reformed” Baptists or some of the more conservative “new Calvinists”—has revised slightly more of the confessions, but has also added more to the content of the confessional legacy: their confession’s argument for the baptism of believers only has been made alongside its clearer articulation of double imputation in justification, the eternal covenant of redemption, and the distinction between church and state. Both parties are descended from the same confessional parent-texts, but because both parties define the church according to the three marks outlined in Belgic 24, they are not in a position to recognize each other’s congregations as authentic ecclesial communities. Nevertheless both parties share an extraordinary amount of common ground, and can appreciate and take advantage of each other’s strengths.

Party A is concerned by what Party B has removed but appreciates some of Party B’s additions. Party B admits that it has significantly revised the architectonic structure of the sixteenth-century confessions (e.g., covenant theology), but still wants to be known by the family name. Both parties recognize their distance from the original texts of the confessional family, and recognize that they are not involved in the repristination of early modern theology and practice, however much they might value it. Both parties recognize that they are not “Reformed” in any unqualified or essential way, and that they have each received the legacy of the Reformed confessions in different ways. Mutual respect, derived from common roots, exists alongside a recognition that they cannot share any real ecclesial cooperation. As both parties admit their distance from the earliest texts, they each grant the other permission to use the title “Reformed,” recognizing that the term does not represent an essentialist repristination of a sixteenth- or seventeenth-century body of knowledge or practice, and that they are likely using the term to refer to different things. This way forward would encourage adherents of both parties to recognize that members of neither of these parties are “Reformed” in any essential way, but that they are all heirs of the same confessions, and that those confessions are part of the same family tree of theological ideas which they share. And so while neither party is “Reformed” in an unqualified way, both parties are allowed to own the label.

Of course, another part of the way forward may involve writing new confessions, or finding new and more precise descriptors for the various iterations of the early modern confessions to which we might currently subscribe. The reticence of some to endorse the writing of new confessions is understandable in light of some recent disputes among the Reformed and Presbyterians in North America. However, one must be impressed by a simple glance at the table of contents of James Dennison’s three-volume series of sixteenth-century creeds and confessions that each local group of Reformed believers felt at liberty to confess its theology afresh, and that they did so in communities that had their own share of characters with strange views. And the way forward may also require that we rename the substantially revised texts we still identify by a common descriptor.

This discussion about the utility of the term “Reformed” should serve as a call to return to *sola scriptura*. It is ironic that the “truly Reformed” who deny Reformed identity to anyone who does not use the *quia* method

of subscription of either the Westminster Standards or the Three Forms of Unity also object to requiring Reformed Christians to subscribe to the Erastianism of Belgic 36 and WCF 23 because they believe the Bible contradicts those parts of the Reformed confession. In other words, these truly Reformed do not believe that the Belgic 36 of 1561 and the WCF 23 of 1647 accurately summarize biblical revelation about the civil magistrate. Thus, it would behoove the “truly Reformed” to meet those to whom they want to deny Reformed identity on the exegetical battlefield, rather than to simply tell them what “the confession says,” since even the “truly Reformed” do not subscribe what “the confession says” about the civil magistrate.<sup>42</sup> This call does not amount to *solo scriptura*, since exegesis is always informed by systematic and historical theology. But it does echo the concerns of John Owen, who, perhaps reflecting on the frustrations of his work for a Cromwellian religious settlement, worried that confessions of faith were no more than “a Procrustes’ bed to stretch them upon, or crop them unto the size of, so to reduce them to the same opinion in all things.” The effort to impose a confession of faith would, he felt, be “vain and fruitless ... that men have for many generations wearied themselves about, and yet continue so to do. ... When Christians had any unity in the world, the Bible alone was thought to contain their religion. ... Nor will there ever, I fear, be again any unity among them until things are reduced to the same state and condition.”<sup>43</sup> It was an extraordinary conclusion at which England’s principal defender of high Calvinism had arrived: “In a word, leave Christian religion unto its primitive liberty, wherein it was believed to be revealed of God, and that revelation of it to be contained in the Scripture, which men searched and studied, to become themselves, and to teach others to be, wise in the knowledge of God and living unto him, and the most of the contests that are in the world will quickly vanish and disappear. But whilst every one hath a *confession*, a *way*,

<sup>42</sup>For example, Meredith Kline has recently been one of the most successful recruiters of Baptists to the Presbyterian position because, while he was careful to guard the intent of the confession, he used a line of exegetical argument that had real, theological integrity. Most public debates of the last few decades between Baptists and Presbyterians have found the Presbyterian position under substantial attack because Presbyterians use the ecclesiology of Westminster Larger Catechism 31 (which is in complete agreement with Baptist ecclesiology) to turn around and argue for the Presbyterian sacramental theology of WCF 28.

<sup>43</sup>John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William Goold (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1850–1853), 14: 314.

a *church*, and its *authority*, which must be imposed on all others ... we may look for peace, moderation and unity, when we are here no more, and not sooner.”<sup>44</sup> And Owen hardly ever called himself “Reformed.”

## V

As we have sought to argue in this chapter, the question of who has the authority to confess becomes more complicated when non-denominational labels, like “Reformed,” come into play. While individual denominations do use the term in their titles, we tend to use it more broadly to describe a movement, the exact parameters of which remain unclear. But that movement is not based on a single confession of faith, even an evolving one, as a single denomination would be. Instead it draws its support from the members of multiple denominations, networks, and autonomous congregations, with confessions that compete with each other, and, because of their continual evolution, contradict each other as well as earlier versions of themselves. These denominations and congregations all claim to be part of the movement, but none of them have the authority to police its boundaries, and so those boundaries are ever changing, with only the opinions of the most networked or the best resourced to indicate who can continue to be permitted to be part of the club. The irony is that many of the people who are trying to police the boundaries of the contemporary “Reformed” movement, as well as many of those whose “Reformed” credentials they resist, would have been well outside of the boundaries of the movement five centuries previously.

These may be some of the reasons why it is so difficult to pin down the meaning of “Reformed.” The term does not have any fixed meaning—unless that meaning is to be strictly historical. Only those Christians who subscribe to the theological content outlined by the first confessors in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries should be identified as “Reformed” in an uncomplicated manner. The rest of us should measure our difference from them, and give less confusing names to ourselves and our preferred iteration of the original Reformed confessions. It is difficult to escape the possibility that “Reformed,” as a descriptor of a multidenominational movement, may be as fractured, volatile, and perhaps even as meaningless as “evangelical.”<sup>45</sup> We might be on safer ground if we stuck to identifying

<sup>44</sup> Owen, *Works*, 14: 314–315.

<sup>45</sup> Darryl Hart, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the age of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004).

ourselves by specific denomination-type labels—at least we would have something specific against which we could be measured. The problem is that some polemicists are defining the “Reformed” community to exclude some people who want to be in it (e.g., “Reformed” Baptists) while including within that community others that the writers of their confessions did not want to be identified with (e.g., the defenders of a secular state). But when we make this move, either as individuals, as congregations, or as denominations, we are inventing our own confessional paradigm and pretending that it is historical, “like Narcissus,” as Hart has put it, spurning “the objective reality of the Reformed confession in favour of [our] own reflection.”<sup>46</sup> We agree with Clark: “if we are to recover our confession, we must enter into an honest, binding relation to those documents and the tradition in which they were composed.”<sup>47</sup> But we do not believe that we can radically change the content of a confession of faith and continue to describe it by the same name. There is an oddly postmodern turn at the center of the drive to police the boundaries of “Reformed.”

So perhaps the term “Reformed” has had its day. Perhaps “Reformed” can be deconstructed just as Hart has demonstrated that “evangelicalism” can be deconstructed—for neither label refers to anything particularly concrete or fixed, and what ultimately matters in terms of adhering to these labels is how we self-identify, rather than whether our self-identification is approved by others already in the club.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps becoming “Reformed” means entering into a community, the theological boundaries of which are controlled by documents which exist in a constant state of flux, with no one knowing whether a doctrine that is unsailable in one age will be rejected in the next. Or, in the tradition of constitutional originalism and strict construction, perhaps the confessions do not allow any of us the title of “Reformed.” Guy du Bres might be excused for believing so. After all, he might say, we are all Anabaptists now—and that is what presents such a challenge to the recent proposals about the renewal of Reformed identity. For the authors of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century confessions did not elevate to credal status any doctrines that they regarded as esoteric or negotiable—and they could not have regarded any departure from their confessional statements as a recovery of the Reformed confession.

<sup>46</sup> Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession*, p. 17.

<sup>47</sup> Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession*, p. 154.

<sup>48</sup> Hart, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism*, passim.

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## “Reformed Baptist”: Anachronistic Oxymoron or Useful Signpost?

*Matthew C. Bingham*

**Abstract** A growing number of Christian churches around the world describe themselves as “Reformed Baptist.” But while those adopting the moniker believe it to accurately describe their distinct theological heritage, some within the wider Presbyterian and Reformed community strongly disagree. Some Reformed historians and theologians have argued that the term “Reformed Baptist” is an anachronistic oxymoron, an inaccurate label that both distorts our understanding of what it means to be “Reformed” and obscures the real identity of those it purports to describe. This chapter critically engages with these claims from both historical and theological perspectives. While conceding that the term “Reformed Baptist” would not have been easily intelligible to early modern actors, the chapter argues that this historical reality does not imply any logical inconsistency on the part of those adopting the label today. Thus, the term “Reformed Baptist” remains a useful signpost for the twenty-first-century church.

**Keywords** Baptist • Presbyterian • Reformed • Puritanism • Early modern Britain • Historical theology

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M. C. Bingham (✉)

Systematic Theology and Church History, Oak Hill College, London, UK

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The relationship between Baptists and Presbyterians has always been a tense one. Consider a story retold by Henry Cromwell, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, in a letter dated September 22, 1657. The incident involved the Belfast Baptist William Dix, around whom had gathered a group of “divers sober and peaceable people” who were “together in the public meeting place there, to hear the said Mr. Dix and seek the Lord.” Nothing initially seemed out of the ordinary as Dix addressed his gathered flock and expounded Scripture. Soon, however, the service was interrupted by Henry Livingston, the Presbyterian minister in nearby Drumbo. Together with some “three or four hundred men,” Livingston “in a tumultuary way rushed into that assembly.” After “some reviling language” had been exchanged between the parties, one of the Presbyterians “in a rude manner laid hands upon the said Mr Dix” and pulled him out of the pulpit. Once the Baptist was physically removed, he was immediately replaced by the Presbyterian Mr. Livingston, who told the gathered crowd that in removing Mr. Dix, “they had order from the Presbytery” and “that he would do the like again if required.”<sup>1</sup>

Some 350 years removed from the confrontation between Dix and Livingston, Baptist-Presbyterian relations have sufficiently improved so as to make physical violence between the two groups decidedly unlikely. This does not, however, mean that all is well. For despite its strangeness and historical distance, the early modern incident just described continues, in significant ways, to offer a picture of the present-day Reformed Baptist position vis-à-vis the wider Reformed tradition. For just as the presence of William Dix in what many regarded as a Presbyterian pulpit was an offense and a provocation, so too, twenty-first-century Baptists using the adjective “Reformed” to describe themselves are likewise construed as unwelcome interlopers, audaciously claiming a title, position, and theological identity to which they are not entitled. In the eyes of many within modern Reformed and Presbyterian circles, the conjunction of “Reformed” and “Baptist” is seen as a contradiction in terms, an anachronistic oxymoron that attempts to unite two fundamentally contradictory ideas. The most prominent spokesperson for this position has been R. Scott Clark, who argues against applying the adjective “Reformed” to any Baptist on the grounds that Baptists are by definition excluded from the “Reformed

<sup>1</sup>“Henry Cromwell to Sir John Clotworthy, Sir John Skevington, Thomas Cooper, Arthur Hill, John Druckenfield, George Rawdon and Roger Lindon” in Robert Dunlop, ed., *Ireland under the Commonwealth: Being a Selection of Documents Relating to the Government of Ireland from 1651 to 1659*, vol. ii (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1913), 670–672.

confession,” which, “considered narrowly, can be the only stable and reasonable definition of the adjective ‘Reformed.’”<sup>2</sup> Clark maintains that the adjective Reformed has an objective and clearly defined meaning; it is a word which “denotes a confession, a theology, piety, and practice that are well known and well defined and summarized in ecclesiastically sanctioned and binding documents.” These documents, according to Clark, are “the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed confessions, which we might call the six forms of unity,” by which he means the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dort, and the Westminster Confession along with its shorter and larger catechisms. Collectively, they define and demarcate the Reformed tradition, and because all of these early modern confessional statements affirm paedobaptism, the Reformed tradition, therefore, would necessarily exclude any and all Baptists.

The case thus made is simple, direct, and powerful. And yet, I would suggest that the relationship between Baptists and the Reformed tradition is somewhat more complicated than it might initially appear. To explore these complexities, I want to focus on the label “Reformed Baptist,” and ask whether it is ever an appropriate one. Is “Reformed Baptist” an anachronistic oxymoron, or a useful signpost? Or, to put the question more pragmatically, are those churches which self-describe as “Reformed Baptist” justified in doing so? In framing the question this way, we can clarify at the outset that we are not asking whether “Reformed Baptists” can subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity or hold office in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)—they cannot (although the latter has been tried, a topic to which we shall, in due course, return). And this, of course, is the crux of the problem: ultimately, though it would be attractively simple to imagine it so, the question at issue is not about stable, objective identity markers like confessional subscription or denominational affiliation, but rather about the far more nebulous and fluid concept of who rightly belongs within the bounds of something called the “Reformed tradition.” Unfortunately, staking a legitimate claim to membership within something so inherently vague cannot be easily settled. This is not to say that the concept is infinitely elastic and determined entirely by one’s own subjective sense of oneself. But it is to say that inclusion within the Reformed tradition is not as clearly defined as we might like it to be, and claims to the contrary should be regarded with suspicion.

<sup>2</sup>R. Scott Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession: Our Theology, Piety, and Practice* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 36.

## I

To this end, we can begin our reflections by affirming that Clark and others are surely correct to reject any nomenclature that would effectively reduce the Reformed tradition to either a strong view of divine sovereignty or monergistic soteriology. In this sense, the term “Reformed” is routinely misused and abused when it is applied uncritically to wide swathes of evangelical Christianity, a group which often includes dispensationalists, charismatics, and any Southern Baptist who can approve at least three of the so-called “Five Points.” As Clark and others have rightly maintained, the Reformed tradition represents a far richer and more complex theological heritage than this, and to promiscuously include within its boundaries any and all who honor God as fully sovereign simultaneously negates the utility of the “Reformed” label and obscures the actual theological and ecclesial identities of the groups to which it is wrongly applied.

This is a helpful point of departure, and yet, we are still left with the most interesting questions unanswered. More specifically, to warn against reducing Reformed theology to a particular soteriological framework does not tell us whether or not the term “Reformed Baptist” might ever be appropriately and usefully deployed. To ask that latter question shifts the target of our enquiry away from the low-hanging fruit of the so-called “young, restless, and Reformed,”<sup>3</sup> and requires us instead to focus upon a much narrower and much more carefully defined segment of contemporary Christianity. To ask the question in this way sidesteps high-profile disagreements over, say, whether or not John Piper should be described as a “Reformed theologian,”<sup>4</sup> and instead narrows our inquiry to those churches which subscribe to the Second London Baptist confession of faith (1677/1689).

This move complicates the question enormously because Reformed Baptists draw on a seventeenth-century confessional document that was explicitly patterned after the Westminster Confession (1646) and the Savoy Declaration (1658). The Baptist confession was first drafted in 1677 but is now more commonly associated with 1689, the year in which it was

<sup>3</sup>See Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008).

<sup>4</sup>Kevin DeYoung, “Is John Piper Really Reformed?,” <https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/kevindeyoung/2013/11/07/is-john-piper-really-reformed/>; (accessed June 8, 2016); R. Scott Clark, “Is John Piper Reformed? Or Holding the Coalition Together (Updated),” <http://heidelblog.net/2013/11/is-john-piper-reformed-or-holding-the-coalition-together> (accessed June 8, 2016).

officially adopted at the Particular Baptist General Assembly.<sup>5</sup> In the document’s preface, its signatories explained that they adopted the language of Westminster and Savoy “to manifest our consent with both, in all the fundamental Articles of the Christian Religion.” They claimed to have “no itch to clogg Religion with new words” but rather wanted to display their “hearty agreement” with the “wholesome Protestant doctrine” which was agreed upon by “Protestants in divers Nations and Cities.”<sup>6</sup> The London Baptist Confession then represents an explicit attempt by early modern Baptists to situate themselves within a wider Reformed Protestant community. As James Renihan has argued, by publishing this confession, seventeenth-century Baptists “were declaring with some vigor their own desire to be placed in the broad stream of English Reformed Confessional Christianity.”<sup>7</sup>

Whatever one ultimately decides concerning the appropriateness of the term “Reformed Baptist,” one cannot deny that twenty-first-century Baptists who adopt this confessional heritage have committed themselves to far more than just meticulous providence and the TULIP. In subscribing to the Second London Confession, one is affirming a covenantal hermeneutic inherently opposed to dispensationalism, the regulative principle of worship, an understanding that the Ten Commandments—even the fourth—must be read as a summary of God’s moral law, and all of the other distinctively Reformed emphases that one would expect from a document that self-consciously copies the Westminster Confession. When we shift our focus away from the regrettable tendency of many to equate “Reformed theology” with a high view of God’s sovereignty and instead examine Reformed Baptist churches subscribing to the 1689 London Baptist Confession, the relationship between Baptists and the Reformed tradition immediately becomes far more complicated.

If we accept Clark’s explanation that the word “Reformed” can and must be objectively anchored within the early modern Reformed confessions, then the question becomes not, “can Baptists be Reformed?” but, rather, “does the 1689 qualify as an early modern Reformed confession?”

<sup>5</sup> See *Faith and Life for Baptists: The Documents of the London Particular Baptist General Assemblies, 1689–1694*, James M. Renihan, ed. (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> *A Confession of Faith* (London, 1688), “To the Judicious and Impartial Reader,” no pagination.

<sup>7</sup> James M. Renihan, *Edification and Beauty: The Practical Ecclesiology of the English Particular Baptists, 1675–1705* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 20.

This question is more difficult and requires that we bring our twenty-first-century concerns into conversation with the early modern English context in which the confessions in question were produced. Of course, it will not do to reply quickly that the issue is settled simply because the 1689 resembles documents of undoubted Reformed pedigree. If the 1689 were an exact replica of previous confessions, then they would not have needed to produce the document in the first place, and the differences may well disqualify the Baptist confession and its adherents from a legitimate claim to a share in the Reformed tradition. But, while we must avoid an overly hasty rush to affirm the legitimacy of “Reformed Baptists” on the basis of the 1689, we must also avoid dismissing them too quickly on the grounds that other early modern Reformed confessions unanimously rejected believers-only baptism. The question at issue is not whether the 1689 matches the wider Reformed tradition at every point, but rather whether its points of clear divergence are significant enough to exclude it from appropriately claiming a home within that wider tradition. I contend that we can make progress on this front by listening more sensitively to the historical context out of which Particular Baptists emerged during the mid-seventeenth century. In pursuit of that goal, the title of this chapter has posed a question: is “Reformed Baptist” an anachronistic oxymoron or a useful signpost? Let me answer my own question as follows: “Reformed Baptist” is, in a significant sense, deeply anachronistic, but it is not oxymoronic, and, therefore, I contend that it is a useful signpost for the twenty-first-century church. We will now consider each aspect of this statement in more detail.

## II

First, the term “Reformed Baptist” is, indeed, anachronistic, and it would not have been easily intelligible to early modern actors. Nowhere in any early modern source do we find even a single example of the term either used by or applied to the Particular or Calvinistic Baptists who emerged out of independent churches in London during the mid-seventeenth century. Those outside of Baptist circles, whether enemies or friends, most commonly referred to those denying paedobaptism as “Anabaptists.” In his 1642 defense of paedobaptism, the independent lay preacher Praise-God Barebone described Baptists as those “commonly called, by a Nic-Name put upon them, Anabaptists.”<sup>8</sup> During the early 1640s the

<sup>8</sup> P[raisegod] B[arbone], *A Discourse Tending to Prove the Baptisme in Or under the Defection of Antichrist, to Be the Ordinance of Jesus Christ* (London, 1642), sig. A2r.

Anabaptist label was seen as sufficiently self-explanatory and well-understood as to have been the default term used across a range of contexts from theological polemic to political debate in the House of Commons.<sup>9</sup> Presbyterian preacher Stephen Marshall, for instance, in a 1644 sermon delivered before the Westminster Assembly, made casual reference to contemporary “Anabaptists” who “blush not to say, that the Antients, especially the Greek Church, rejected [paedobaptism] for many hundred years.”<sup>10</sup>

The ubiquity of the term Anabaptist is evidenced by the energy which Baptists themselves expended in ineffectual attempts to distance themselves from it. The First London Baptist Confession, for example, published in 1644, was titled, *The Confession of Faith, of Those Churches Which Are Commonly but Falsely Called Anabaptists*. Similarly, in July 1645 the London Baptist leader William Kiffen published *A Briefe Remonstrance of the Reasons and Grounds of those People commonly Called Anabaptists*. Throughout that discourse, Kiffen refers to himself and his church network variously as “our Congregations,” “our separated Congregations,” and “gatherings of the Saints together,” but he is never able to settle on a consistent, positive self-identifier.<sup>11</sup> But, however they identified themselves, they certainly did not use the term “Reformed Baptist.” According to Robert Oliver, that term was not in widespread use until at least the late 1950s, when a group of baptistic students attending Martyn Lloyd-Jones’ Friday night meetings at Westminster Chapel became dissatisfied with the term “Strict Baptist.” Prompted further by John Doggett’s republication of the Second London Confession in 1959, these students began to use the term “Reformed Baptist” as a more attractive, and, perhaps, more accurate, descriptor of their movement.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup>For example, Immanuel Knutton, *Seven Questions about the Controversie between the Church of England, and the Separatists and Anabaptists, Briefly Discussed* (London: 1645) on March 29, 1644 Sir H. Mildmay was ordered to “prepare and bring in an Ordinance for suppressing the unlawful assembling and meeting together of Antinomians and Anabaptists; and the venting their erroneous and schismatical Opinions, in the Countries as well as in London;” “House of Commons Journal Volume 3: 29 March 1644”, in *Journal of the House of Commons*: Volume 3, 1643–1644 (London, 1802), pp. 440–441. British History Online <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/commons-jrnl/vol3/pp440-441> (accessed May 19, 2016).

<sup>10</sup>Stephen Marshall, *A Sermon of the Baptizing of Infants* (London: 1644), 3.

<sup>11</sup>William Kiffen, *A Briefe Remonstrance* (London: 1645), 6, 10, 11.

<sup>12</sup>Robert W. Oliver, “Baptist Confession Making 1644 and 1689,” presented to the Strict Baptist Historical Society, March 17, 1989; accessed online at <http://www.reformation-today.org/articles-of-interest/455> (accessed May 14, 2018); I am grateful to Dr. Oliver for drawing my attention to this point.

But, for our present purpose, what is more interesting than whether or not seventeenth-century Baptists used the term “Reformed Baptist” is whether or not they would have understood their churches as Reformed churches, regardless of the specific terminology employed. In other words, when, for example, the kingdoms of Scotland and England signed the *Solemn League and Covenant* in 1643, in which they agreed to jointly pursue reformation “according to ... the Example of the Best Reformed Churches,” would Particular Baptist church leaders have thought of their own congregations as properly numbered among those “Best Reformed Churches” under discussion?<sup>13</sup> The answer to this, at least during the mid-seventeenth century when Particular Baptist churches were forming, is almost certainly no. The language of “Reformed churches” during this period was closely associated with the various Protestant state churches fostered by the magisterial Reformation, and because the English Baptists were necessarily outside the boundaries of, in this case, the English national church, Particular Baptists could not have realistically imagined their own semi-legal congregations to be “Reformed churches” in the usual sense. Baptist authors during the period would sometimes use the language of “Reformation,” but always in a dynamic sense that stopped short of claiming a place among the “Reformed churches” of Protestant Europe. This fluid, dynamic sense of Reformation rhetoric was embodied in the famous rallying cry of the Presbyterian Edmund Calamy who announced his desire in 1642 “to reform the Reformation it self.”<sup>14</sup> It is in this sense, and only this sense, that seventeenth-century Baptists applied to themselves the language of Reformation and “reform.” For example, the Baptist Christopher Blackwood could describe “his earnest desire ... to a thorow Reformation, having formerly seen the mischiefs of half Reformation.”<sup>15</sup> In thus applying to his baptistic agenda a standard trope about unfinished Reformation, Blackwood connected rhetorically with the wider culture of English puritanism without necessarily declaring Baptist congregations to be “Reformed churches” in the strong sense.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *A Solemn League and Covenant, for Reformation and Defence of Religion* (London: 1643), 5.

<sup>14</sup> Edmund Calamy, *Englands looking-glasse* (London: 1642), 46.

<sup>15</sup> Christopher Blackwood, *The Storming of Antichrist* (London: 1644), title page.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Edward Terrill’s description of “reformation” within his own Broadmead Church in Bristol. Terrill characterizes the rejection of paedobaptism as one part of a larger reformation process through which he and his co-religionists cast off “popish darkness” and “were truly

This same dynamic is nicely illustrated by an exchange between the Particular Baptist leader William Kiffen and the Presbyterian Robert Poole. After Poole’s daughter Elizabeth joined Kiffen’s Baptist church against her father’s wishes during the early 1640s, the elder Poole wrote to Kiffen, demanding that he answer questions regarding his faith and practice, a series which included the following: “How can you vindicate by the Word of God, your Anabaptisticall way, from the sinfull guile of notorious Schisme, and defection from all the Reformed Churches?” We note in passing that Poole reflexively associates participation in “the Reformed Churches” as participation in the English National Church—defection from the state church automatically left one guilty, in Poole’s eyes, of “notorious Schisme, and defection from all the Reformed Churches.” But, in any event, if Kiffen had considered his Baptist church to be a Reformed church, the wording of Poole’s question practically demanded that he take the opportunity here to say so. And yet, Kiffen did no such thing, but instead rooted his baptistic practice in an appeal to the practice of the early church: “if by Reformed Churches, you mean those Churches planted by the Apostles in the Primative times, which are the platform for all Churches in all ages to look unto ... wee then shall vindicate by the Word of God our Anabaptisticall way, as you are pleased to call it, from that guile.”<sup>17</sup> Nowhere in what followed did Kiffen anywhere attempt to deny that his church had, as alleged by Poole, “defected” in some sense from the “Reformed Churches.”

### III

It seems, then, beyond doubt that when we consider the seventeenth-century origins of Particular Baptists, the term “Reformed Baptist” carries with it a strong sense of anachronism and should not be used to describe early modern actors. And for many, these historical observations would be sufficient to establish that so-called Reformed Baptists in the twenty-first century have no legitimate claim to a share in the Reformed tradition. For these critics, the fact that “Reformed” and “Baptist” do not go together

reformed in a greate measure, in turning from the Worship of Antichrist.” Here, “reformed” clearly conveys a dynamic, rather than static sense, with the emphasis on movement away from Roman Catholicism. I am grateful to James Renihan for drawing my attention to this reference. *The Records of a Church of Christ in Bristol, 1647–1687*, Roger Hayden, ed. (Gateshead: The Bristol Record Society, 1974), 93–96.

<sup>17</sup> Kiffen, *A Briefe Remonstrance*, 12.

historically is a sufficient basis upon which to conclude that they also do not go together logically. But it is not obvious that such a leap—a leap from labeling “Reformed Baptist” as anachronistic to then labeling “Reformed Baptist” oxymoronic—is warranted.

Often, critics of the term “Reformed Baptist” will move from allegations of anachronism to allegations of oxymoron through a rhetorical vehicle, which we might call the “time machine test.” The time machine test asks us to imagine a hypothetical group of twenty-first-century Reformed Baptists who travel back in time to the early modern era, only to find that their “Reformed” credentials fall woefully short when scrutinized by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century divines. As R. Scott Clark puts it: “One cannot doubt that our time-travellers would return home disappointed to be rejected by the Synod of Dort, but were they to try again at the Westminster Assembly, they would find a similarly chilly reception.” Clark concludes that “If our young, restless, and Reformed theologians could not find hospitality at Dort or Westminster, we may fairly ask whether the adjective ‘Reformed’ is properly used of them.”<sup>18</sup> Putting aside the already noted fact that the Reformed Baptists with whom we are concerned are not at all identical with the amorphous and variegated group sometimes referred to as “young, restless, and Reformed,” the time machine test initially sounds quite convincing. Clark and others are undoubtedly correct that our imagined Reformed Baptist time travelers would not receive a warm welcome from the early modern divines. Depending upon where and when they chose to visit, our time travelers would, at best, be denied the right hand of fellowship and sent on their way; at worst, they would face imprisonment or possibly even death. There are, however, at least two significant problems with using the time machine test as a basis upon which to reject “Reformed Baptist” as a nonsensical oxymoron.

First, though it is true that early modern divines considered “Anabaptism” to be a serious error, much of the intensity driving that rejection was predicated upon a rationale which no longer applies to our twenty-first-century debate. Namely, seventeenth-century British divines strongly associated opposition to paedobaptism with anarchy, immorality, and the dissolution of the civil state. The continental Anabaptist project was inherently antithetical to the state churches that defined and made possible the magisterial Reformation. As Scott Dixon has observed, sixteenth-century Anabaptists “explicitly rejected one of the main foundations of traditional

<sup>18</sup> Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession*, 344.

Christian order, the unity of the *corpus Christianuum* created and confirmed through child baptism, and replaced it with a form of baptism based on an individual and voluntary decision.”<sup>19</sup> This meant that the magisterial Reformers would never have been able to consider the rejection of paedobaptism apart from a concomitant unraveling of their comprehensive, state-sponsored reform project. It is instructive on this point to note that Baptists received a very warm welcome among English Congregationalists. As Joel Halcomb has demonstrated, seventeenth-century Congregational churches all across England would regularly tolerate baptistic views within their membership. This is largely due to the fact that Congregational assemblies, unlike their mid-seventeenth-century Presbyterian counterparts, were not wedded to the notion of a nationally comprehensive church structure.<sup>20</sup> Thus, in contrasting these starkly different English responses to the Baptist challenge, we can grasp the degree to which mid-seventeenth-century English Presbyterians conflated their theological critique of the baptistic position with a wider concern for civil order and the integrity of the national state church.

This general concern combined in the early modern mind with the more specific specter of the 1534 Anabaptist uprising in Münster, Germany. For many seventeenth-century observers in Britain, to give any ground to “Anabaptism” was to court the terrifying prospect that the Münster rebellion’s insurgency, violence, and forced polygamy might recur again at any moment.<sup>21</sup> Immanuel Knutton, for example, a parish priest in Nottinghamshire, wrote that the Baptists then troubling the Church of England “doe ill, for they follow those pestilent hereticks called Anabaptists in Germany, who sprung up there ... not very long since, about Luthers time.”<sup>22</sup> The eminent polemicist and Westminster Assembly commissioner

<sup>19</sup>C. Scott Dixon, *Protestants: A History from Wittenberg to Pennsylvania, 1517–1740* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 99.

<sup>20</sup>J.A. Halcomb, “A Social History of Congregational Religious Practice during the Puritan Revolution” (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2010), 144–167.

<sup>21</sup>See Sigrun Haude, *In the Shadow of “Savage Wolves”: Anabaptist Münster and the German Reformation during the 1530s* (Boston: Humanities Press, 2000); Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (London: Pimlico, 2004), 252–280; Ralf Klötzer, “The Melchiorites and Münster,” in *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism, 1521–1700*, ed. John Roth and James Stayer (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 217–256.

<sup>22</sup>Immanuel Knutton, *Seven Questions about the Controversie Between the Church of England and the Separatists and Anabaptists, Briefly Discussed* (London: 1645), 23.

Daniel Featley attempted to demonstrate the continuity between continental Anabaptists and English Particular Baptists by prefacing his critiques of the latter with a lurid historical account of the former. To this end, his “Remarkable Histories of the Anabaptists” was filled with stories of continental Anabaptists enacting the violence and sexual perversity which Featley believed would necessarily follow the rejection of infant baptism.<sup>23</sup>

So strong was the reflexive association between the baptistic position and the horrors of Münster that many critics of the English Baptists refused to believe that the 1644 Particular Baptist confession was a genuine statement of Baptist views, and held instead that the 1644 signatories must, in fact, have been disguising their actual convictions. “The Confession of faith,” wrote the Scottish Presbyterian Robert Baillie, “which the other year seven of their Congregations did put forth” must not “be taken for the measure of their faith.” Baillie alleged that such a document could not accurately represent what a majority of English Baptists really believed, because “their usuall and received doctrines doe much more agree with the Anabaptists in Germany, then with that handful who made this confession.” To this end, Baillie promised his readers that he would “demonstrate the same very spirit to breathe this day in the Anabaptists of Britain, which inspired their Fathers of former times in Germany.”<sup>24</sup> Likewise, Daniel Featley wrote that in publishing a seemingly orthodox confession, the London Baptists actually “offer to the unlearned their faire cup full of venome, anointing the brim with the honey of sweet and holy words, they thrust in store of true positions, that together with them they may juggle in the venome of their falshood: they cover a little ratsbane in a great quantity of sugar that it may not be discerned.”<sup>25</sup>

With these remarks, I am obviously not suggesting that early modern Reformed theologians opposed the baptistic position *only* because of its unsavory associations with violence and civil unrest. In the anti-Baptist treatises to which I have just been alluding, the authors spend the majority of their time wrestling with the relevant biblical texts and the theological

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Featley, *The Dippers Dipt* (London: 1646), 199–219.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Baillie, *Anabaptism, The True Fountain of Independency, Antinomy, Brownisme, Familisme* (London: 1647), 18, 28–29.

<sup>25</sup> Featley, *The Dippers Dipt*, 220; for mid-seventeenth-century polemical exchange between Baptists and their critics, see Matthew C. Bingham, “English Baptists and the Struggle for Theological Authority, 1642–1646,” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 68:3 (2017), 546–569.

problems which they believed the baptistic position created. But what I hope the preceding historical observations make clear is that the hostility and intensity with which early modern Reformed Protestants opposed “Anabaptism” cannot be taken at face value as a straightforward measure of the seriousness with which Reformed and Presbyterian Christians today should oppose so-called Reformed Baptists. The categorical and unequivocal rejection of “Anabaptists” by early modern Reformed theologians was fraught with political concerns and dubious historical parallels that have nothing to do with whether the doctrine of certain twenty-first-century Baptists should or should not qualify them to legitimately identify with the Reformed tradition. In this way, the fact that early modern Reformed theologians would not have modified the noun “Baptist” with the adjective “Reformed” is not as helpful to us as it might initially appear and neither, then, is the time machine test.

The time machine test is also unhelpful for a second reason: namely, that very few individuals living in the twenty-first-century West, no matter how truly Reformed they might imagine themselves to be, could possibly pass it. What would the Westminster Divines think of a contingent of time-traveling PCA ministers who claimed faithfulness to the Reformed tradition and yet denied the civil magistrate a sufficiently robust role in furthering godly religion, questioned the wisdom of the regulative principle,<sup>26</sup> and scrupled the morally binding nature of the fourth commandment? This is to say nothing of the conflicts which would certainly arise after our hypothetical Presbyterian time travelers got around to sharing their controversial views on the Pope’s relationship to Antichrist, the appropriate use of lots,<sup>27</sup> and whether or not an infant of unbelieving parents might be baptized on the merits of a godly great-grandfather.<sup>28</sup> If one objects that times have changed and that these issues are no longer of pressing concern in the twenty-first century, such an objection serves only

<sup>26</sup> For example, John Frame, “A Fresh Look at the Regulative Principle: A Broader View,” <http://frame-poythress.org/a-fresh-look-at-the-regulative-principle-a-broader-view> (accessed June 8, 2016).

<sup>27</sup> Westminster Larger Catechism, 112.

<sup>28</sup> For example, the Scottish commissioner to the Westminster Assembly Samuel Rutherford wrote: “And I thinke the Scripture saith here with us, that the nearest parents be not the onely conveyers and propagators of federal holinesse to the posteritie ... We also affirme, that the Lord extendeth the mercy of the Covenant to a thousand generations, and therefore the line of the covenant-mercy is not broken off, for the unbeleefe of the nearest parents;” Samuel Rutherford, *The Due Right of Presbyteries* (London: 1644), 259–263.

to reinforce the point that the historical distance between ourselves and the seventeenth century makes the time machine test unhelpful. To borrow Clark's own standard, if our time-traveling contingent of PCA ministers "could not find hospitality at Dort or Westminster," might we not "fairly ask whether the adjective 'Reformed' is properly used of them"? The point is not to criticize these imaginary modern ministers,<sup>29</sup> but simply to suggest that if the legitimate heirs of the Reformed tradition are only those to whom early modern European Protestants would have offered a warm and full-throated welcome, then we will find the truly Reformed to be a very small group indeed.

#### IV

To summarize the argument thus far, although early modern Reformed divines would have surely been puzzled by the suggestion that there could be something called a "Reformed Baptist," it does not follow that the term is an unhelpful oxymoron. Simply because sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theologians could not have fathomed how the two terms could be reconciled, it does not mean that they were correct in their assessment. Not only were early modern divines beholden to a host of notions with which we now disagree, their assessment of what the baptistic position entailed was built upon assumptions that were inaccurate in the seventeenth century and utterly irrelevant in the twenty-first. Thus having concluded that "Reformed Baptist" is an anachronism, we cannot build a bridge from there to the conclusion that the term is also an oxymoron. If "Reformed" and "Baptist" are logically incommensurate, one will need to demonstrate that the baptistic position itself somehow compromises the essence of the Reformed faith.

<sup>29</sup> I recognize that the primary burden of Clark's *Recovering the Reformed Confession* is, as the title suggests, to call those within his own ecclesiastical circles to greater confessional fidelity. Thus, one might reply that the answer to confessional slippage within Reformed and Presbyterian churches is to do precisely that, rather than opening up the tradition to allow for greater diversity. However, while this might apply to certain issues I have identified—say, the relaxation of the regulative principle—no one, to my knowledge, is seriously proposing a complete "recovery of the Reformed confession" with respect to all the various areas of divergence between seventeenth- and twenty-first-century theology and practice (e.g., regarding the role of the civil magistrate, the baptizing of infants on the strength of a distant relative's profession of faith, etc.). Thus, no one involved in this conversation is immune from the tensions created by subscription to historically situated—and increasingly historically distant—confessional standards.

There are two issues, of course, which separate Reformed Baptists from the mainstream of the Reformed tradition: ecclesiastical polity and baptism. With respect to ecclesiastical polity, Baptists are Congregationalists, while the majority report within the Reformed tradition is Presbyterian. But those arguing for excluding Reformed Baptists on this basis face a difficult task, as the Reformed tradition within the English-speaking world has comfortably housed both Episcopalians and Congregationalists within its ranks. Under Elizabeth I and James I, English divines regularly promoted their harmony and unity with other “Reformed churches” even while the Church of England was thoroughly Episcopalian in its ecclesiastical form.<sup>30</sup> Though the rise of Laudianism under Charles I made the association more difficult,<sup>31</sup> this does not change the fact that many English ministers with impeccable Reformed credentials have operated happily under an Episcopalian government. Likewise, the “Congregational Way,” as it developed on both sides of the Atlantic during the seventeenth century, has included within its ranks many of the pastors and theologians with whom the Reformed tradition has been most closely identified.<sup>32</sup> In his recent survey of *Reformed Theology*, Michael Allen names two Congregationalists, John Owen and Jonathan Edwards, as the “greatest Reformed theologians” of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, respectively.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Congregational ecclesiology during the seventeenth century was perhaps closer to Presbyterianism than many modern observers might realize.<sup>34</sup> Although the differences were real and the

<sup>30</sup>See Anthony Milton, *Catholic and Reformed: The Roman and Protestant Churches in English Protestant Thought, 1600–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>31</sup>Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism, c. 1590–1640* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>32</sup>On Congregationalism, see Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *Visible Saints: The Congregational Way, 1640–1660* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957); Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1963); Stephen Brachlow, *The Communion of the Saints: Radical Puritan and Separatist Ecclesiology, 1570–1625* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); James F. Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties: The Congregationalists in Colonial Massachusetts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Michael P. Winship, *Godly Republicanism: Puritans, Pilgrims, and a City on a Hill* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2012).

<sup>33</sup>R. Michael Allen, *Reformed Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 46.

<sup>34</sup>For a sense of just how subtle these distinctions were in seventeenth-century debate, see Hunter Powell, *The Crisis of British Protestantism: Church Power in the Puritan Revolution 1638–44* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).

subject of intense debate,<sup>35</sup> Congregational and Baptist churches during the seventeenth century insisted upon a plurality of elders ruling over the local congregation and argued that multiple local congregations should be joined together in a robust consociation. These assemblies of multiple congregations stopped short of issuing binding directives to local churches, but had far more in common with Presbyterian polity than is often imagined by those who assume the independence of the local church to be of the essence of Baptist identity.<sup>36</sup>

Clearly, then, the more difficult case is the rejection of paedobaptism, a position which is often assumed to compromise the integrity of the Reformed faith. R. Scott Clark, for example, writes:

My argument is that the nomenclature “Reformed Baptist” is an oxymoron. One is either Reformed or Baptist but not both. Look at all of the 60+ Reformed confessions in the 16th and 17th centuries. Every single one of them teaches infant baptism and the Belgic Confession denounces in the strongest terms (“we detest the Anabaptists”) the Anabaptists for denying infant baptism. It’s not historically controversial to say that the Reformed did not regard the denial of infant baptism as a light thing. Look at church orders of the Dutch Reformed Churches in the period. They all struggled with the challenge presented by the Anabaptist denial of infant baptism and they never wavered in their conviction that infant baptism is essential to the Reformed faith.<sup>37</sup>

Although, in reading the above, one might wonder whether the exclusion of the 1644 and 1689 London confessions from the list of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed confessional documents constitutes the assumption of that which one needs to prove, one need not disagree with any of the facts presented here to nonetheless question the conclusion toward which they are directed. We have already seen that the historical rejection of Baptists by the Reformed churches was inextricably bound up with issues which are no longer relevant to the twenty-first-century church.

<sup>35</sup> See Polly Ha, *English Presbyterianism, 1590–1640* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

<sup>36</sup> See *A Confession of Faith Put Forth by the Elders and Brethren of Many Congregations of Christians (Baptized upon Profession of Their Faith) in London and the Country* (London: 1677), xxvi.

<sup>37</sup> This passage is taken from a comment Clark left on his blog; <http://heidelblog.net/2013/11/is-john-piper-reformed-or-holding-the-coalition-together/#comments> (accessed June 8, 2016).

But if the historical arguments are not as strong as they initially appear, what about the theological arguments?

On the surface, it seems odd that infant baptism, which the Reformed hold in common with Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and the Eastern Orthodox, among others, would become a *sine qua non* of Reformed identity. A far more reasonable basis upon which to differentiate the Reformed tradition would be the covenantal framework which undergirds both Reformed paedobaptism and the Reformed theological system as a whole. For while Reformed theologians retained paedobaptism, their rationale for the practice was wholly distinct from that given by the other great branches of Christendom. As David Wright has observed, “the leaders of the Protestant Reformations in the sixteenth century perpetuated a rite which had first come into its own (in the post-Augustinian era) and was sustained for virtually all its centuries-long medieval life by doctrinal stipulations which they could no longer endorse.”<sup>38</sup> It is the covenantal context in which the Reformed set their practice of paedobaptism that is distinctive to Reformed theology, not the practice of paedobaptism itself. Geerhardus Vos saw with clarity that the emphasis on covenant not only defines, to a great extent, the Reformed tradition, but also differentiates it from other traditions: “the doctrine of the covenants is a peculiarly Reformed doctrine. It emerged in Reformed theology where it was assured of a permanent place and in a way that has also remained confined within these bounds.”<sup>39</sup> It is covenantal or federal theology which differentiates the Reformed tradition from all others, and on the subject of covenant, the distance between Reformed Baptists and the mainstream of the tradition is not as far apart as many have supposed.

It is often suggested that Baptists cannot be Reformed because their theology denies the Reformed commitment to covenantal theology and the continuity of God’s redemptive work across both Old and New Testaments. Michael Allen, for example, argues that “one cannot be both baptistic and identified as ‘Reformed’ in as much as baptistic ecclesiology depends on a sharp distinction between Israel and the church, thereby disagreeing with the Reformed way of affirming the unity of the covenant

<sup>38</sup> David F Wright, *Infant Baptism in Historical Perspective: Collected Studies* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2007), xxvii, see also 68–88.

<sup>39</sup> Geerhardus Vos, “The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology” in R.B. Gaffin, ed., *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation, The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2012), 234.

of grace.”<sup>40</sup> Or consider an ecclesiastical case brought before the PCA’s Nineteenth General Assembly in 1991, in which the denomination ruled against a North Carolina congregation which had sought to approve three church officers who had, among other things, taken exception to the Westminster Standard’s teaching on infant baptism.<sup>41</sup> In defending the position that infant baptism was properly considered “fundamental” to the “Reformed faith,” the General Assembly based their conclusion on the observation that the theme of covenant “stands as an essential part of the system of doctrine” presented in the Westminster Standards, and that the denial of infant baptism compromises both the unity of the Covenant of Grace and Reformed theology’s wider commitment to covenant theology.<sup>42</sup>

Obviously, our concern here is not whether a Reformed Baptist can subscribe to the Westminster Standards or be an officer in a denomination which does—I would give an unequivocal “no” in both cases. Rather, our question is whether or not the denial of paedobaptism disqualifies Reformed Baptists from identification with the Reformed tradition broadly conceived. The PCA disciplinary case just cited is of interest only insofar as it illustrates the way in which a baptistic position is often understood to entail a rejection of the covenant theology upon which the Reformed faith depends. But what if the confessional heritage of seventeenth-century Reformed Baptists did not entail a rejection of Reformed federalism? Though surely many if not most American Baptists trend in a dispensational direction, contemporary Reformed Baptists along with their seventeenth-century predecessors have long been laboring to develop a baptistic reading of redemptive history that takes the basic Reformed covenantal structure as its starting point.

John Spilsbery’s *A Treatise concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptisme* (1643) is one of the earliest and most significant seventeenth-century theological treatises written by an English Particular Baptist. In it, even at this early stage, Spilsbery’s commitment to Reformed federal theology is immediately evident. Heavily indebted to William Ames, Spilsbery affirms the unity of the covenant of grace throughout redemptive history—one

<sup>40</sup> Allen, *Reformed Theology*, 5.

<sup>41</sup> “Bowen vs. Eastern Carolina Presbytery, Case 90–98,” *Minutes of the Nineteenth General Assembly* (1991), <http://www.pcahistory.org/documents/bowen-vs-easterncarolina.pdf> (accessed June 8, 2016).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 18–22.

substance, administered differently as befitting God’s redemptive historical purpose:

Let all this be well considered, and I doubt not but the difference between the Covenants God made with Abraham before Christ and this under Christ, will appear very great, though in some respect for substance the same: Yet in the outward profession of them, the difference is great<sup>43</sup>

Spilsbery was likely a principal architect of the 1644 London Baptist Confession, a document in which the “everlasting covenant of grace” and an intra-Trinitarian *pactum salutis* clearly form the ground of God’s redemptive activity.<sup>44</sup> As Particular Baptists developed and nuanced their theological formulations further, the covenantal framework and the unity of God’s people throughout redemptive history remained constant. Baptist theologians like John Tombes, Thomas Patient, and Nehemiah Coxe would all produce seventeenth-century treatises that argued for the restriction of baptism to professing believers without sacrificing a federal framework that was remarkably similar to that enshrined in the Westminster Standards.<sup>45</sup> In the modern era, the effort to craft a federal theology that is at once baptistic and consonant with the wider Reformed tradition has been taken up with renewed enthusiasm by Reformed Baptists such as Richard Barcellos, Samuel Renihan, and Pascal Denault.<sup>46</sup> Whatever one

<sup>43</sup> John Spilsbery, *A Treatise Concerning the Lawfull Subject of Baptisme* (London: 1643), 8.

<sup>44</sup> *The Confession of Faith, of Those Churches Which Are Commonly (Though Falsly) Called Anabaptists* (London: 1644), x, xii.

<sup>45</sup> John Tombes, *An Examen of the Sermon of Mr. Stephen Marshal* (London: 1645); John Tombes, *Antipaedobaptism, or No Plain nor Obscure Scripture-Proof of Infants Baptism or Church-Membership* (London: 1652); Michael Thomas Renihan, *Antipaedobaptism in the Thought of John Tombes* (Auburn, MA: B & R Press, 2001); Thomas Patient, *The Doctrine of Baptism and the Distinction of the Covenants* (London: 1654); on Baptist federalism during the 1650s, see Crawford Gribben, *God’s Irishmen: Theological Debates in Cromwellian Ireland*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 79–98; Nehemiah Coxe, *A Discourse of the Covenants That God Made with Men before the Law* (London: 1681).

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Richard C. Barcellos, ed., *Recovering a Covenantal Heritage: Essays in Baptist Covenant Theology* (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2014); Samuel D. Renihan, *From Shadow to Substance: The Federal Theology of the English Particular Baptists (1642–1704)* (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2018); Pascal Denault, *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology: A Comparison Between Seventeenth-Century Particular Baptist and Paedobaptist Federalism*, trans. Mac Wigfield and Elizabeth Wigfield (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books,

thinks of their conclusions, they cannot be easily written off as “dispensationalists” and it is difficult to deny that they are making an impressive effort to defend baptistic conclusions within an authentically Reformed covenantal framework. Given the diverse array of nuanced position within the wider world of Reformed federalism (e.g., strong disagreement over the question of “republication”<sup>47</sup>), it is not at all clear why the baptistic variant should be considered beyond the pale. It is perhaps worth remembering in this context that Karl Barth, a man whom R. Scott Clark himself has described as “the most influential Reformed theologian of the twentieth century,”<sup>48</sup> rejected infant baptism in the strongest possible terms, describing it as “an ancient ecclesiastical error” and a “wound from which the Church suffers at this genuinely vital point.”<sup>49</sup>

Indeed, the diversity within the Reformed tradition goes well beyond its many covenantal formulations to encompass and include fierce debates over a host of soteriological, ecclesiological, and eschatological questions.<sup>50</sup> Peter Lake has drawn our attention to the way in which the lines demarcating orthodoxy and heterodoxy among early modern Puritans often had less to do with concrete positions and more to do with “a sense of ideological and emotional affinity, of being on the right and, indeed, on the same side—of being, in some fundamental sense, in agreement.” It was this more nebulous sense of who was included and excluded, Lake argues, that “allowed particular disagreements, even on

2013); Nehemiah Coxe and John Owen, *Covenant Theology from Adam to Christ*, ed. Ronald D. Miller, James M. Renihan, and Francisco Orozco (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2005).

<sup>47</sup> Brenton C. Ferry, “Works in the Mosaic Covenant: A Reformed Taxonomy,” in Bryan D. Estelle, J.V. Fesko, and David VanDrunen, eds. *The Law Is Not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009); Andrew Woolsey, *Unity and Continuity in Covenantal Thought: A Study in the Reformed Tradition to the Westminster Assembly* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012); “Report of the Committee to Study Republication,” Eighty-third (2016) General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, <http://opc.org/GA/republication.html> (accessed September 15, 2016).

<sup>48</sup> Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession*, 149.

<sup>49</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, eds., G.W. Bromiley, trans. (London: T&T Clark, 2009), IV.4, 160–190; see also Karl Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, Ernest A. Payne, trans. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1948), 41–54.

<sup>50</sup> Such debates are amply illustrated by the essays collected in Michael A.G. Haykin and Mark Jones eds., *Drawn into Controversie: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates within Seventeenth-Century British Puritanism* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011).

quite central doctrines like justification, to be organised under the sign of doctrinally peripheral or, in Whitgift’s priceless phrase, the inherently ‘disputable’ and hence managed and controlled.”<sup>51</sup> It does not seem impossible that our own contemporary discussions of “Reformed Baptists” may, in like manner, be tacitly steered by a similar pre-critical sense that we already know where the borders of theological identity lie even before the issues have been fully explored. When one considers this diversity of acceptable early modern Reformed opinion, combined with the impressive overlap between the 1689 London Baptist Confession and its seventeenth-century predecessors, the suggestion that a baptistic reading of Reformed federalism would decisively scuttle one’s claim to a share of the Reformed tradition begins to look like special pleading, leaving one to wonder about the degree to which centuries of early modern, Münster-infused, anti-Anabaptist rhetoric has inappropriately colored our contemporary assessment.

## V

The burden of this chapter has been to consider the appropriateness of the term “Reformed Baptist,” and in light of the preceding reflections, I would conclude that despite being often misused, surely overused, and admittedly anachronist, the label “Reformed Baptist” remains a useful signpost for the twenty-first-century church. Rather than obscuring the contemporary theological landscape, the term helpfully identifies a small subset of twenty-first-century Christianity more accurately and more helpfully than do competing terms like “Calvinistic Baptist” or “Sovereign Grace Baptist.”

With the wider Reformed tradition, Reformed Baptists affirm a monergistic soteriology, an appreciation of God’s meticulous providence, and a robust declaration that all things work “to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, infinite goodness, and mercy.”<sup>52</sup> But alongside these things, and also in keeping with the wider Reformed tradition, Reformed Baptists affirm the regulative principle of worship, demand that a plurality of elders rule in the local congregation, and recognize the need that local churches not be isolated from one another but are instead called

<sup>51</sup> Peter Lake, *The Boxmaker’s Revenge: “Orthodoxy,” “Heterodoxy” and the Politics of the Parish in Early Stuart London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 404.

<sup>52</sup> 1689 Second London Baptist Confession, 5.1.

to hold “communion together” for their mutual “peace, union, and edification.”<sup>53</sup> With the wider Reformed tradition, Reformed Baptists embrace the Lord’s Day as the Christian Sabbath, understand the Lord’s Supper to be more than a bare memorial but rather a means of grace given for our “spiritual nourishment,”<sup>54</sup> and recognize that the Lord of the Decalogue has given therein a summary statement of his immutable moral law. And with the wider Reformed tradition, Reformed Baptists understand all of Scripture as covenantally structured, rejecting dispensationalism and seeing the New Testament church as properly and fully “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16).

On these and other points, those Christians subscribing to the 1689 Second London Baptist confession of faith identify, not with a nebulous and ill-defined “Baptist” community,<sup>55</sup> but rather with the Reformed tradition out of which their confessional document emerged. The fact that the seventeenth-century churchmen who drafted the confession would not have used the term “Reformed Baptist” to describe themselves was the result of political and cultural, rather than theological, considerations and should not dissuade contemporary Christians from embracing the term without embarrassment. Ultimately, then, if pressed as to why I would eschew a term like “Calvinistic Baptist” and stubbornly persist in calling myself “Reformed,” I would simply have to say that I agree with R. Scott Clark and others when they remind us that “Five Points” are not enough. A Calvinistic or Augustinian monergism does not exhaust the confessional heritage to which I subscribe; for that I need a better term: “Reformed.”

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 26.15.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 30.1; see also Richard C. Barcellos, *The Lord’s Supper as a Means of Grace: More Than a Memory* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2013).

<sup>55</sup> For an illustration of just how variegated the “Baptist” experience can be, observe the incredible diversity on display in Thomas Kidd and Barry Hankin’s excellent survey, Thomas S. Kidd and Barry Hankin, *Baptists in America: A History* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

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## Baptists Are Different

*D. G. Hart*

**Abstract** If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, assessing the relations between Baptists and Reformed Protestants is in the mind of the historian. Although some use historical methods and evidence to argue that Baptists and Reformed are closer than R. Scott Clark and D. G. Hart have alleged, this historiography often relies as much on religious convictions as academic expertise. If religiously informed perspectives are possible in professional scholarship, the case for insisting on differences between Baptists and Reformed Protestantism, as this chapter maintains, still makes sense.

**Keywords** Baptist • Presbyterian • Westminster Confession • Confessionalism • Confessional revision • Historical theology

Baptists suffer from an inferiority complex. At least, that is one way of reading the essays about Baptists and Reformed identity by Crawford Gribben and Chris Caughey, and by Matthew C. Bingham. Historians like R. Scott Clark and myself, who have argued for an understanding of Reformed Protestantism that stresses its distinct qualities, especially

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D. G. Hart (✉)  
Faculty of History, Hillsdale College, Hillsdale, MI, USA

creedal, liturgical, and ecclesiological, from evangelical Protestantism, have, from the perspective of these essays on Baptist Protestantism, drawn the lines too narrowly. The result is a version of Reformed Protestantism that excludes Baptists. This may be particularly challenging since the view of Reformed confessionalism from Clark and me leaves Baptists of a predestinarian stripe isolated. These Baptists affirm too much of the teaching of Dort's Synod to fit in with the generic conservative Protestantism that prevails in the United Kingdom and North America. These predestinarians do not want a seat at the table of broad evangelicalism. They want something more doctrinally rigorous and biblical than that. So, it seems, they look for fellowship and comradery with Reformed Protestants. And there they encounter, at least in books written by Clark and me, an understanding of Baptist Protestantism, no matter how much it accords with the so-called Five Points of Calvinism, that is largely negative. Baptists are inferior to confessional Reformed Protestantism, so Clark and I conclude. This treatment leaves Baptists in a religious no man's land. They are too predestinarian and too theologically vigorous to settle for broad evangelicalism or even the so-called New Calvinism of the "young, restless, and Reformed."<sup>1</sup> But these Baptist authors are not sufficiently Reformed for the world of conservative Presbyterian and Reformed churches. The best strategy then is to revise the history of Reformed Protestantism so that Baptists emerge as having much more affinity to the Protestantism that Clark and I defend. In effect, Baptists cannot be inferior if they were part of the Reformed movement at its origins.

Admiration and respect for Gribben, Caughey, and Bingham prompts sympathy for a reconsideration of Reformed Protestantism's borders and how to enforce them. The company of these scholars is pleasant and their commitment to the gospel is commendable. Having them on "my" side would be valuable and even enjoyable. The thought of giving offense or showing disrespect to fellow believers of their caliber is also an obvious cost of maintaining Reformed identity the way Clark and I have done.

Yet, these essays are not sufficient to change my mind even if they warm my heart. I remain convinced that Baptists are different from Reformed Protestants and will let the reader decide whether those differences descend to the level of inferiority. Most of the argument that follows concerns the secondary matter of scholarship. How do historians and theolo-

<sup>1</sup>The phrase comes from Collin Hansen's popular book, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

gians assess Protestant developments in seventeenth-century England? A related question is who has the authority to give a definitive evaluation of Baptists and Reformed Protestants: scholars or church officers? The point of such considerations is to underscore the importance of ecclesiology and scholarship's unacknowledged dependence on church judgments. At a time when the evangelical academy in the United States has made the "integration of faith and learning" a cliché, perhaps Christian scholars, if such persons exist, should examine the way churches inform the categories that allegedly unbiased and impartial scholars use to understand religious history. After all, "Baptist" and "Presbyterian" were historical markers well before historians in the United States formed the American Historical Association.

## I

Why is it that investigation of seventeenth-century England reveals a historian's instinct? In a famous historiographical dispute between J. H. Hexter and Christopher Hill on English Puritanism, the scholarly difference between lumpers and splitters, chiefly a distinction among biologists, entered the domain of historical science. Hexter had written a review of Hill's book, *Change and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century England* that had posited ties of a Weberian kind between capitalism and Calvinism to explain Puritanism's influence on English society. Hexter's objections were in some ways basic. He faulted Hill for misreading sources. But he made a larger point about differing historical temperaments. Hexter referred to "lumpers" as those scholars who were uncomfortable with differences in the past. For historical subjects not to fit in preconceived boxes made the past untidy. In contrast, "splitters" stressed differences and revelled in making distinctions. History for them did not conform to general rules or systems of history but was accidental, unpredictable, and downright messy.<sup>2</sup>

The essays by Gribben, Caughey, and Bingham feature a "lumping" tendency and accordingly fault confessional historians for needless "splitting." Gribben and Caughey do this in a couple of ways. On the one hand, when they criticize contemporary confessionalists for abandoning the Reformed confessions on church-state relations, they also observe that

<sup>2</sup>J. H. Hexter, "The Burden of Proof," *Times Literary Supplement*, October 24, 1975, 40, 43.

Baptists were closer to seventeenth-century Reformed understandings of the magistrate than those who make the confessions central to Reformed identity. In effect, they link seventeenth-century Reformed and Baptists together against contemporary confessionalists and, for good measure, throw in the implication that today's defenders of the confessions are actually closer to Anabaptists than to Calvin, Rutherford, or Owen. On the other hand, Gribben and Caughey adopt an organic metaphor for understanding Reformed identity and in the process make Reformed Protestants and Baptists part of the fruit from the same Protestant tree. Both started out in the same ecclesiastical and theological milieu—not specified, but likely assumed to be Calvinistic English Protestantism in tension with the Anglican establishment. But over time each group started to emphasize diverse aspects of the original English dissenting Protestantism and in turn used those emphases to rule out the other side from something properly Reformed. In which case, contemporary Reformed confessionalists are as far from the original article as Calvinistic or Particular Baptists. Gribben and Caughey lump both groups under the category of defectors from the seventeenth-century genuine article. But they also lump by situating confessionalists and Baptists in the same variety of English Protestantism. They write:

Both parties are descended from the same confessional parent-texts, but because both parties define the church according to the three marks outlined in Belgic 24, they are not in a position to recognise each other's congregations as authentic ecclesial communities. ... Both parties recognise their distance from the original texts of the confessional family, and recognise that they are not involved in the repristination of early modern theology and practice, however much they might value it.

For Gribben and Caughey the way forward is more lumping through a shared sense of common origins:

Both parties recognise that they are not "Reformed" in any unqualified or essential way, and that they have each received the legacy of the Reformed confessions in different ways. Mutual respect, derived from common roots, exists alongside a recognition that they cannot share any real ecclesial cooperation. As both parties admit their distance from the earliest texts, they each grant the other permission to use the title "Reformed," recognising that the term does not represent an essentialist repristination of a sixteenth- or seventeenth-century body of knowledge or practice, and that they are likely using the term to refer to different things.

As a result, neither confessionalists nor Baptists are Reformed in “any essential way,” but are both “heirs of the same confessions,” and “those confessions are part of the same family tree of theological ideas which they share.” Neither confessionalists nor Baptists are unqualifiedly Reformed but both share use of the label.

Matthew Bingham takes a somewhat different tack but winds up siding with lumpers over splitters in the end. He acknowledges that seventeenth-century Reformed Protestants had good reasons for thinking Baptists did not belong. Baptists did not baptize babies and they relied on a different form of church government—congregational over Presbyterian. These features of Baptist practice led Reformed Protestants to associate Baptists with Anabaptists. Bingham notes the polemical treatises produced by Reformed Protestants who believed that Baptists were guilty of the same radical ideas that colored Anabaptists even if English Baptists themselves took views different from the original radical wing of the Reformation. The implication is that seventeenth-century Reformed Protestants regarded Baptists as a fringe movement, comparable to the sideline character and unstable politics of Anabaptists. Yet, Bingham argues that this dismissal of Baptists cannot be taken “at face value”—here comes the lumping—because of what Baptists shared with Reformed. That commonality was federal theology. Here he invokes John Spilsbery’s 1643 treatise on baptism, which argues for believer’s baptism within the categories of federal theology. According to Bingham, “[a]s Particular Baptists developed and nuanced their theological formulations further, the covenantal framework and the unity of God’s people throughout redemptive history remained constant.” He cites John Tombes, Thomas Patient, and Nehemiah Coxe who wrote treatises “that argued for the restriction of baptism to professing believers without thereby sacrificing a federal framework that was remarkably similar to that enshrined in the Westminster Standards.” As a result, even though Bingham is more willing than Gribben and Caughey to concede diversity in seventeenth-century English Protestantism, he sides with them on the historiographical project of lumping.

The curious aspect of this analysis is the failure to acknowledge what seems to be the historical elephant in the room, namely, that Baptists did not simply revise the Westminster Standards but wrote a new confession of faith. This piece of seventeenth-century Protestantism is arresting for at least two reasons. One is the fault that Gribben and Caughey find in contemporary confessionalists who depart from the original Westminster

Confession on, for instance, teachings about the magistrate's duties. For instance, they write that "the question of the religious duty of the civil magistrate exposes" the inherent difficulty of contemporary efforts to recover "the Reformed confession." Gribben and Caughey are right to observe that the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed confessions "maintained a position on government that has been disclaimed by many, if not most, contemporary Reformed Christians." The reason is that those earlier Protestants affirmed that civil authorities had a religious duty, "and that the details of that duty were to be found in Scripture." Modern-day Reformed Protestants have "moved away from this vision of religiously responsible government to embrace a variant of 'two kingdoms' theology which argues that the civil magistrate should be guided by general revelation while the church should be governed by Scripture." So, if contemporary confessionalists do not have to meet the requirement of receiving the Reformed confessions on church-state relations, why should Baptists not have the same liberty to reject infant baptism, for instance, but still claim Reformed identity?

If someone tried to answer that contemporary Reformed received but revised the earlier confessional standards, Gribben and Caughey remain skeptical. They deem that the effect of such revisions, "as is well known, was to entirely repudiate some of the convictions of Scottish Presbyterians" (even though to reject infant baptism of the Westminster Confession places Baptists in the fold of Reformed Protestantism?). Although American Presbyterians changed the confession, they continued to hold to a "radically revised" as the Westminster Confession. Gribben and Caughey add that American Presbyterians continued to revise the confession and that the 1903 additions introduced confessional incoherence among New World churches. They also quote from an Orthodox Presbyterian Church website that concedes the disorder that confessional revision introduced: "there are now so many ways for contemporary Presbyterian churches to receive the Westminster Confession of Faith that we cannot be sure what a so-called 'confessional commitment' actually amounts to." Because of such revisions and the limited authority confessions now have thanks to the variety of interpretations, the call for returning to the Reformed confessions is too little, too late. To exclude Baptists from being Reformed for veering from the Westminster Confession is, consequently, a double standard.

But at least Presbyterians, unlike Baptists, tried to see themselves in continuity with the confessions of the Reformed churches. Indeed, the other reason why the Baptist case for being Reformed is odd is that

seventeenth-century Baptists did not themselves lump their variety of Protestantism to the larger Reformed world by amending the Westminster Confession. Instead, Baptists adopted new confessional standards, such as the Second London confession of faith (1677/1689). The competency of this author extends well beyond the circumstances that led English Baptists to compose this confession, but Gribben, Caughey, and Bingham give the impression that since Baptists and Reformed belonged to the same theological camp, sharing the same confessional formulations should not have been that big a problem. And yet, a comparison of the two confessions shows differences that go beyond infant baptism. For instance, chapter 15 of the London Confession rewrites Westminster's fifteenth chapter on repentance. Some of the language is the same. But Baptists for some reason decided to reorder, supplement, and revise the Assembly's earlier writings. So too, Baptists added a twentieth chapter, "Of the Gospel and the Extent Thereof," which includes teaching on the covenant of works that is not in the Westminster Confession's chapter on the Covenant. This may or may not be significant. Only historical theologians know for sure. But on the surface, the decision to write a new chapter on the gospel and include the covenant of works there suggests a different kind of covenant theology at play among the Baptists. Of course, the chapters on the church and sacraments (ordinances for Baptists) reveal additional differences. Then the London Confession is curious for deleting paragraphs five and six, on the implications of adultery and fornication for divorce and remarriage, from Westminster's twenty-fourth chapter on marriage.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these differences, some still assert that these contrasts should not distinguish Baptists from Presbyterians and Reformed. According to Shawn Wright, a professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, the Baptist confessions of the 1670s and 1680s were designed to show that Baptists were closer to Reformed than they were to "aberrant" groups like the Quakers.<sup>4</sup> Even so, those historical circumstances prompt Wright to advise contemporary Baptists not to use the London Confession. The implication is that it is too close to the Reformed tradition and not distinctly or sufficiently Baptist by contemporary standards. In which case, we have the irony of

<sup>3</sup>"A Tabular Comparison of the 1646 WCF and the 1689 LBCF" available at [http://www.proginosko.com/docs/wcf\\_lbcf.html](http://www.proginosko.com/docs/wcf_lbcf.html) accessed August 31, 2017.

<sup>4</sup>Wright, "Should You Use the 1689 London Confession in Your Church," *IX 9 Marks*, March 1, 2010, <https://www.9marks.org/article/should-you-use-1689-london-confession-your-church/> accessed August 31, 2017.

proximity in the past that requires distance between predestinarian Baptists and Presbyterians in the present, the opposite of what Gribben, Caughey, and Bingham argue.

Either way, seventeenth-century Baptists, unlike eighteenth-century American Presbyterians, did not accept and amend the Westminster Confession. They decided against lumping for splitting while Presbyterians chose to revise and thereby lumped themselves to the Westminster Divines. Those decisions by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Protestants should matter to historians. A new confession means something different from what went before.

## II

For the past three decades, at least, since evangelicals in the United States took a page out of Abraham Kuyper's *Lectures on Calvinism* to argue against bracketing faith and politics, academics working in born-again Protestant circles have also insisted that isolating faith from scholarship is a mistake (if not a betrayal of Christ's Lordship). In the specific realm of historical scholarship, the Conference on Faith and History, founded in 1967, gathered North American historians from Protestant backgrounds for a professional historical organization in which religious convictions could gain a hearing.<sup>5</sup> If someone reads *Fides et Historia*, the most sustained attention from Conference members has gone to the difference that faith makes for historical investigation. Do Christian historians pursue historical scholarship differently than non-Christians? Does faith add a perspective that the mainstream historical profession misses? Almost everyone who writes in *Fides et Historia* thinks faith does make a difference but hardly anyone agrees about how. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, but not one historical perspective.

A similar dynamic is at play in the debates over whether Baptists are confessionally Reformed since historians on both sides of the question have a religious and ecclesiastical axe to grind. Mind you, doing the history of Christianity without depending on ecclesiology is next to

<sup>5</sup>The best case for faith-based scholarship among historians remains George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). On the origins of the Conference of Faith and History and a critique of efforts to do history from a self-conscious Christian perspective, see D. G. Hart, "History in Search of Meaning: The Conference on Faith and History," in Ronald A. Wells, ed., *History and the Christian Historian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 68–87.

impossible, even though scholars in religious studies or religious historians seldom admit their debt to the church(es). A historian could try to tell the history of Protestantism in seventeenth-century Virginia simply by figuring out what Jesus and the apostles taught and then applying it to the churches and professing believers who made the English colony a home. That scholar would then overlook all rulings and proceedings of 2000 years of church history to devise her own definition of Christianity, though she would also have to go back and figure out the canon of Scripture herself, that is, if she were so inclined to be biblical-centric in her approach. Perhaps she would understand Christianity as a mystical religion. That would certainly add a different perspective on the history of the Church of England in Virginia and the rise of its awakened critics. Or, a historian of religion, which is what generally happens, can rely on the determinations of various ecclesiastical bodies (and the academic institutions and faculties they have sponsored) to identify a definition of Anglicanism that then allows a historian to make sense of the faith that emerged in Virginia and the departures and dissent from it.

In the case of confessional Reformed Protestantism and Baptists, mainstream historians divide according to their ecclesiastical commitments or affinities. Indeed, the scholars who study seventeenth-century English Protestantism have little trouble excluding Baptists from the world of confessional Reformed Protestantism. Diarmaid MacCulloch, for instance, in *The Reformation: A History* (2005) lumps Baptists with Presbyterians but mainly as a post-Restoration phenomenon. With the return of the Anglican establishment, “Presbyterians now found themselves alongside the Independents and the Baptists (together with the Quakers whom they despised).”<sup>6</sup> In other words, what created affinity was being on the outside as dissenters looking in. More recently, Carlos Eire in *Reformations: The Early Modern World* (2016) locates Baptists at one end of a “broad spectrum of opinion.” On one side were “moderate Puritans” who held to the ideal of reforming the Church of England from within. At the other end were English Baptists who took the question of adult baptism and ran with it only to arrive “at many of the same logical conclusions as the Anabaptists Calvin had despised.”<sup>7</sup> Philip Benedict sees more institutional order among Baptists than the affinities noticed by MacCulloch and Eire. In his

<sup>6</sup> MacCulloch, *The Reformation* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 513.

<sup>7</sup> Eire, *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450–1650* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 344, 345.

book, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed* (2002), Benedict recognizes by 1660 a network of 150 particular Baptist churches which were distinct from the Congregationalists who in 1658 met at Savoy Palace. Benedict does acknowledge a kind of continuity from Westminster to the London Confession, but also observes that Baptists revised the doctrinal outlines of the confessional Reformed even more than the Congregationalists.<sup>8</sup> Among historians without obvious ecclesiastical stakes in the narrative, splitting is not decisive but present in the telling of seventeenth-century English Protestantism.

But for historians who also have a foot in the world of faith, questions about Baptist and Reformed Protestant relationships have a bearing on contemporary Protestantism. Those arguing that Baptists belong to Reformed Protestantism find support in parachurch agencies like The Gospel Coalition (hereafter TGC) and the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals (hereafter ACE—see what they did there?). In those settings the general tendency is to read continuity into the story line between the Canons of Dort, the Westminster Assembly, and the London Confession. For instance, Jeremy Walker, who writes for ACE, complains about my book on the history of Calvinism<sup>9</sup> because it erases Baptists from history:

Past tragedies and triumphs can or must now be dismissed on the basis of the fact that I was never actually there. After all, if John Gill, Andrew Fuller and Charles Spurgeon have been airbrushed from the history of Calvinism, what hope for one who I now discover is, in every sense, a non-entity? It would seem that Baptists must accept that we exist in an ethereal world of our own imagination and need therefore to leap into the substantial world of Presbyterianism if we are to have any real presence, to the great rejoicing of those who have already discovered an allegedly-genuine time-space continuum.<sup>10</sup>

At TGC, where along with ACE Presbyterians and Baptists swim together comfortably, Kevin DeYoung explains why Reformed confessionalists are mistaken to exclude Baptists from the history of Calvinism. The reason? Herman Bavinck did not. So, to defend the assertion that John Piper, the

<sup>8</sup> Benedict, *Christ's Church Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 402, 404.

<sup>9</sup> Hart, *Calvinism: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Walker, "An Explanation," *Reformation 21*, August 14, 2013 <http://www.reformation21.org/blog/2013/08/an-explanation.php> accessed August 23, 2017.

wildly popular Minneapolis pastor who almost brought the New Calvinism into being through the sheer energy of his earnestness,<sup>11</sup> DeYoung turns the early twentieth-century systematic theologian into a church historian:

“From the outset Reformed theology in North America displayed a variety of diverse forms.” [Bavinck] then goes on to mention the arrivals of the Episcopal Church (1607), the Dutch Reformed (1609), the Congregationalists (1620), the Quakers (1680), the Baptists (1639), the Methodists (1735 with Wesley and 1738 with Whitefield), and finally the German churches. “Almost all of these churches and currents in these churches,” Bavinck observes, “were of Calvinistic origin. Of all religious movements in America, Calvinism has been the most vigorous. It is not limited to one church or other, but—in a variety of modifications—constitutes the animating element in Congregational, Baptist, Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed, and German Reformed churches, and so forth” (1.201).<sup>12</sup>

On that basis, DeYoung concludes that Particular Baptists like John Piper can affirm ninety-five percent of the Westminster Confession. For that reason, Reformed is a word that applies sometimes to ecclesiastical bodies or to “confessional systems.” In that latter sense, it is a theology that includes Presbyterians and Baptists.

In contrast, those historians stressing Reformed confessionalism as a distinct form of Protestantism are firmly situated in ecclesiastical settings where some energy goes into resisting the blob of parachurch evangelicalism. Clark, for instance, writes *Recovering the Reformed Confession* explicitly with the churches that belong to the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council in mind. His argument, in part, is to show how contemporary Reformed churches have veered from the profession, piety, and practices of historic Reformed churches by becoming assimilated to evangelicalism, a form of Protestantism that reduces anti-liberal Protestants to their lowest common denominator—in other words, evangelicalism lumps. Meanwhile, although Clark admits John Owen to the ranks of Reformed theologians, he will not let in the so-called New Calvinists of the “Young, Restless and Reformed” phenomenon. For these millennial evangelicals, Reformed is little more than predestinarian and they would find a “chilly

<sup>11</sup> On Piper’s prominence, see Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed*.

<sup>12</sup> DeYoung, “Is John Piper Really Reformed?” The Gospel Coalition (blog), November 7, 2013 <https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/kevindeyoung/2013/11/07/is-john-piper-really-reformed/> accessed August 23, 2017.

reception” at either the Synod of Dort or the Westminster Assembly.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, in my own book in defense of confessional Protestantism (as opposed to pietism), *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism*, a churchly understanding of the faith, one spelled out in the Reformed and Lutheran creeds of the Reformation, is the actual version of conservative Protestantism.<sup>14</sup> Later expressions, like the awakenings or pietism, that stress personal experience and individual devotion over belonging to a church and worshiping corporately, are novel forms of Protestantism and actually lead to the kind of disregard for creeds that typified Protestant modernism of the early twentieth century. Neither Clark nor I in these books go out of our way to exclude Baptists. That may surprise readers of the essays by Gribben, Caughey, and Bingham whose collective point is one of feeling left out. At the same time, Clark and I do not look at predestinarian Baptists, like Charles Spurgeon or John Piper, as allies in an effort to recover the reforms of sixteenth century and their embodiment in the confessions, polity, and liturgies of the Reformed churches.

In both the case of Clark and myself, present-day concerns about Christian fellowship and communion inform assessments of the past, not the sort of integration of faith and historical learning that usually transpires in Conference of Faith and History circles where ecclesiology and creeds become barriers to scholars hoping to find fraternity warmed by religion. Pan-denominational efforts like Banner of Truth, ACE, or TGC need a Calvinism that includes Baptists, especially after the resurgence of predestinarian theology in the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant communion in the United States. If Calvinism is narrow and strictly ecclesial, these parachurch organizations lose a potentially big audience for their enterprise. At the same time, confessional historians reveal their own biases as churchmen who use denominational boundaries to inform their reading of the past. The logic is fairly simple: if the United Reformed Churches do not allow Baptist pastors into the pulpit or behind the Lord’s Table, the history of Reformed Protestantism should reflect a similar understanding. Why exclude Baptists from Reformed ministry today but include them in the history of Reformed Protestantism? A scholarly move that is at odds with ecclesiastical practice makes no sense.

<sup>13</sup>R. Scott Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession: Our Theology, Piety, and Practice* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 344.

<sup>14</sup>Hart, *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

## III

The 600-pound gorilla in the historiography of Baptists and Reformed Protestantism is Lutheranism. Here the roles reverse, with predestinarian Baptists rarely including Lutherans in their recovery of historic Protestantism and confessional Reformed historians admiring Lutherans for their self-conscious ecclesial and creedal identity. Gribben, Caughey, and Bingham do not mention Lutherans, which makes sense because seventeenth-century English Protestantism showed no signs of a Lutheran influence. Clark and I, in contrast, regard Lutherans as confessionalists who are clearly not Reformed but who take their confessions, practice, and ministry seriously enough to regard broad evangelicalism and its parachurch aspects as solvents of a Protestant communion's integrity. Consequently, Clark and I have little trouble recognizing and are willing to live with the reality that Lutherans cannot affirm the Westminster Standards or the Three Forms of Unity.<sup>15</sup> For Gribben, Caughey, and Bingham, however, Lutherans are a mystery. According to their logic, if the London Confession is downstream from Westminster, then why not also argue that Westminster is an extension of Heidelberg, which leads back to Augsburg, which leaves Baptists an extension of the same theological movement that Martin Luther started? Instead of talking about Reformed Baptists, why not Lutheran Baptists? Furthermore, if parachurch predestinarians who refuse to baptize babies can claim that John Piper can affirm ninety-five percent of the Westminster Standards, one might also wonder how much of the Augsburg Confession the Minneapolis minister would dispute. Chances are that Piper could not affirm roughly 4 of the 28 articles (on the sacraments and holy days), which makes him by one measure eighty-six percent Lutheran. Yet, Baptists of a predestinarian bent want to be included not among the Lutherans but Reformed Protestants.

One explanation might be that Luther was too earthy. His piety is much more off-putting than the earnest, worn-on-the-sleeve pursuit of holiness that typified the Puritans. Another factor is cultural. In the English-speaking Protestant world, Baptists and Presbyterians share a common history and culture that makes similarities easier to conceive than thinking of German Protestants, who have no stake in the British monarchy, the English ecclesiastical establishment and the dissenters it created, or

<sup>15</sup> See Clark, *Recovering*, 216; and Hart, *Lost Soul*, ch. 6.

American independence, as fellow believers. German and English Protestants have distinct histories and that makes Lutheranism seem foreign to most Anglo-American Protestants while Calvinism feels familiar, part of the religious landscape, for English-speaking Protestants.

In the end, though, the question is not historical or cultural but one of authority, namely, who decides whether Baptists are part of Reformed Protestantism? Do historians and parachurch leaders or is the decision the task of church officers? Of course, a royal commission of federal agency charged with categorizing Protestant groups could readily solve the dispute, but those days are long behind. So the duty of policing Reformed Protestantism's boundaries has to fall to non-governmental agencies. It is one that hovers over Gribben, Caughey, and Bingham's essays. Bingham, for instance, cites the case of a 1991 decision from the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) that ruled a member congregation was wrong to ordain officers who had taken exceptions to the Westminster Confession on infant baptism. He goes on to grant that the PCA was fully within its rights to do this because he does not think a Baptist "can subscribe to the Westminster Standards or be an officer in a denomination that does." Gribben and Caughey, in contrast, question whether churches have the authority to define Reformed Protestantism. They assert that "the movement" is not based on a single confession of faith and draws its support from "the members of multiple denominations, networks and autonomous congregations, with confessions that compete with each other, and, because of their continual evolution, contradict each other as well as earlier versions of themselves." The result is that the communions that claim to be Reformed lack "the authority to police its boundaries." This leaves scholars—historians and historical theologians—as the umpires, the ones better situated to judge who belongs to "the club." Indeed, Bingham concludes that even though a church may police its boundaries, scholars can see what ecclesiastical officers cannot—namely, that predestinarian Baptists and Reformed confessionalists belong to the "Reformed tradition *broadly* conceived" (emphasis mine). Gribben and Caughey take a postmodern approach to who belongs. They write, "what ultimately matters in terms of adhering to these labels is how we self-identify, rather than whether our self-identification is approved by others already in the club." The reason is that the theological boundaries, the confessions of the churches, are "in a constant state of flux."

Such historiographical shrugs are an odd response to four centuries of Baptists and Presbyterians existing in separate communions. Baptists do

not ordain Presbyterians and vice-versa. When it comes to membership, Baptists require Presbyterians to be rebaptized if they want to join a Baptist congregation. Meanwhile, Presbyterians may admit Baptists, but do so with reservations. As the Orthodox Presbyterian Church's study committee on whether to receive Baptists as church members put it:

to admit to communicant membership those who "refuse" to present their children for baptism would constitute a weakening of the witness the church bears to the ordinance of infant baptism as one of divine warrant, authority, and obligation. Of greater weight is the fact that infant baptism is the way in which God continues to remind and assure us of that which belongs to the administration of his redemptive, covenantal purpose. The defect of the person not persuaded of this aspect of God's revealed counsel is not concerned with what is peripheral but with what is basic in the Christian institution. And the person who resolutely refuses to present his or her children for baptism is rejecting the covenant promise and grace which God has certified to his people from Abraham's day till now. It is this perspective that lends gravity to the offense.

The General Assembly's committee expressed "sympathy for those who have been subjected to antipaedobaptist arguments and who find it difficult to accede to the necessity and validity of infant baptism." Committee members also conceded that conservative Presbyterian communions were appealing to Baptists who desired "a corporate witness" that was faithful to the gospel. Even so, the committee did not see how a Baptist parent could affirm honestly a membership vow that asked: "Do you agree to submit in the Lord to the government of this church and, in case you should be found delinquent in doctrine or life, to heed its discipline?" Consequently, a Baptist, or "the person refusing baptism for his children" was "delinquent in doctrine."<sup>16</sup> Historical theologians may not be, but Presbyterian and Reformed communions have been clear about this, even after they have revised their standards.

So why have scholars and parachurch leaders had greater trouble recognizing what churches see? It is because academics have less stake in the question? Or is it that parachurch organizations want to have as many people paying conference registrations fees as possible? Numbers do

<sup>16</sup> "Report of the Committee to Consider the Matter Proposed to the Assembly by the Presbytery of the West Coast," General Assembly, Orthodox Presbyterian Church (1966), [http://www.opc.org/GA/refuse\\_bapt.html](http://www.opc.org/GA/refuse_bapt.html) accessed September 6, 2017.

matter to a conception of Reformed that is broad. Scholars can make bigger claims about a wider swath of humanity and parachurch organizations or theological “movements” can arrange for a bigger venue for their celebrity pastors or books written by “lumping” historical theologians.

But if the Reformation was originally an effort to reform the institutional church, if Luther and Calvin were not interested in history seminars about early modern European theology or finding common cause with those who loved Jesus and had him in their hearts, then what church officers say matters more than historians or parachurch organization committee members. That assessment is clearly self-serving for historians who try to be academic while also holding down responsibilities in Reformed communions that refuse to cooperate with Baptist congregations. Nevertheless, given the way that Baptists originally chose their congregations and their own confessions and that Presbyterians historically denied ties with Baptists, a narrow conception of Reformed Protestant not only reflects contemporary relations among Protestants but also bears out the history that some Reformed Protestant scholars narrate.

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## A House of Cards? A Response to Bingham, Gribben, and Caughey

*R. Scott Clark*

**Abstract** One of the great philosophical questions of the Middle Ages concerned the relationship between names and things. The question taken up in this chapter concerns the relationship between the name “Reformed” and what the Reformed churches have historically understood, believed, and confessed as the Reformed theology, piety, and practice. Does that *thing* exist or is it a mere convention, a way of speaking that is subject to endless revision with as many definitions as definers? This chapter argues that, considered historically, there was a recognizable body of beliefs, a piety, and way of practicing the Christian faith among the Reformed, which emerged first in the 1520s and which continued to develop through the seventeenth century, and that it was its theology of the biblical covenants that gave it coherence. Despite the historical improbability—it was not wiped out by the French Wars of Religion, the Spanish Inquisition, the Thirty Years War, nor by the Enlightenment and Higher Criticism—the essence of that theology, piety, and practice continues to find adherents even in the late modern world.

**Keywords** Reformed • Presbyterian baptism • Confessionalism • Covenant theology • Historical theology

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R. S. Clark (✉)  
Church History and Historical Theology, Westminster Seminary California,  
Escondido, CA, USA

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We live in an age of identity politics. Males now identify as females, and females as males, some with neither sex. In such a culture, asserting that an identity is grounded in objective history and facts and necessarily includes some and excludes others is bound to seem narrow-minded, but assert it we must. The identity in question is that of the theology, piety, and practice of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches. Is the category “Reformed” real, does it have boundaries, and if so, what are they and who determines and enforces them? Is the “Reformed” house real, and if so, who is entitled to live in it, or is it a house of cards?

The history of the nomenclature evangelical, Reformed, and Lutheran is interesting and muddy. In the earliest days of the Reformation, the magisterial Reformers and their respective churches were called “Reformed,” “evangelical,” and “Lutheran” without discriminating between the Reformed and the Lutherans. For example, the prologue to the Lutheran Solid Declaration (1580) refers to the Augsburg Confession “as the common confession of the reformed churches.”<sup>1</sup> The expressions “Reformed church” or “the Reformed” emerged gradually. They are not easily found before the 1550s.<sup>2</sup> For example, the references to “the Reformed” or to the “Reformed Churches” in *Luther’s Works* occur only in the notes.<sup>3</sup> The same is true in Zwingli’s works.<sup>4</sup> Calvin may not have used the expression at all. The 1559 French *Confession of Faith*, though given the title, *Confession de foi et discipline ecclésiastique des églises réformées de France* in 1864,<sup>5</sup> in fact, was originally titled simply, *Confession de foi des églises de*

<sup>1</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss ed. *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition Volume II. Part Four: Creeds and Confessions of the Reformation Era* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 205.

<sup>2</sup>The basis for this claim is an electronic search of hundreds of Latin, German, Dutch, and French texts from a variety of traditions covering the period from the early 1520s to the late seventeenth century.

<sup>3</sup>Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works* (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958–); idem, *Luthers Werke Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: H. H. Böhlau, 1883–).

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Huldreich Zwingli, “*The Latin Works and The Correspondence of Huldreich Zwingli ...*” ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson, trans. Henry Preble et al. (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons; Knickerbocker Press, 1912); *ibid.*, *The Latin Works of Huldreich Zwingli*, ed. William John Hinke and Clarence Nevin Heller, vol. 2–3 (Philadelphia: Heidelberg Press, 1922–1929). A search of 65 Latin texts shows the same results.

<sup>5</sup>Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*. 3 vol. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1878–1882), 3.356.

*France*.<sup>6</sup> In 1559, Wolfgang Musculus (1497–1563) spoke of the “Reformed churches” (*reformatis ecclesiis*) as if they were a known, identifiable body of churches distinct from other bodies.<sup>7</sup> Even then, however, the terminology could be fluid. For example, the influential Italian Reformed theologian Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562) rather casually spoke of Zwingli and Luther as “heroes of the Reformed religion” with Oecolampadius, Bucer, and Calvin.<sup>8</sup> The Italian Reformed theologian Girolamo Zanchi (1516–1590) wrote of “the Reformed Churches” in 1564.<sup>9</sup> The expression is found with increasing frequency in documents produced in the later decades of the sixteenth century and quite regularly in the seventeenth century.<sup>10</sup> The language of the *Solid Declaration* (1580) reflects the earlier usage of *Reformed*, which stood as shorthand for “reformed according to the Word of God”: “At that time a number of Christian electors, princes, and estates who had then accepted the pure doctrine of the holy Gospel and had allowed their churches to be reformed according to the Word of God.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, even at the end of the century, defending the cause of the Protestant churches against the Roman criticism that they lacked episcopal succession, Franciscus Gomarus (1563–1641) spoke of Hus, Jerome of Prague, Oecolampadius, Zwingli,

<sup>6</sup>See *Opera Calvini* 9.731–732 in C. G. Bretschneider, ed. *Corpus Reformatorum* (Halle: C. A Schwetschke et Filium, 1834).

<sup>7</sup>“Valent enim plurimum ad excitandos audientium spiritus, praesertim si communiter a plebe fidelium decantentur, quemadmodum in reformatis ecclesiis fieri videmus.” Wolfgang Musculus, *In ambas apostoli Pauli ad Corinthios epistolas commentarii* (Basel, 1559, repr. 1566), 563–574.

<sup>8</sup>“Alii ab illis non dissentiunt: Zuinglius et Lutherus reformatae religionis heroes, Oecolampadius, Bucerus, Calvinus. Possum et alios adducere, sed non suffragatoribus ago.” Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Petri Martyris Vermilii Florentini praestantissimi nostra aetate theologi, loci communes* (London, 1576), 14.27 (p. 138).

<sup>9</sup>“QUONIAM de iis quae ad religionem pertinent, nihil in Ecclesia vel docendum, vel instituendum est., nisi quod ex verbo Domini certò scimus, à Domino fuisse vel per se, vel per Prophetas atque Apostolos, in sua Ecclesia priùs traditum atque institutum: Iccirco omnes reformatae Ecclesiae, sicut in reliquis, sic etiam in articulo de sacra Cena profitentur: se nihil nisi iuxta verbum Domini in scripturis traditum, docere: et protestantur: se nolle vel latum quidem unquam à verbo Dei deflectere.” Girolamo Zanchi, *De dissidio in coena domini: Hieronymi Zanchi iudicium* (Mulhouse, 1564), 5.

<sup>10</sup>For example, Rudolf Gwalther, *In priorem D. Pauli Apostoli ad Corinthios epistolam homiliae XCV* (Zurich, 1572; repr. 1588), 177; Benedictus Aretius, *Examen theologicum, brevi et perspicua methodo conscriptum* (Morges, 1572; repr. 1584), 5.

<sup>11</sup>Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 501.

and Luther, among others, as “leaders” and “doctors” of the Reformed churches.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, whatever ambiguity might have existed regarding how the Reformed considered the Lutherans, they were utterly explicit in their exclusion of the Anabaptists, whom the *Belgic Confession* (1561; article 29) classed with the “sectes.”<sup>13</sup> As the Reformed and Lutheran churches and theologians came to use the now familiar names for each other, they did not include the developing Baptist movements and perhaps most telling of all, the seven formative Particular Baptist churches in London, in the 1640s, did not classify themselves with the Reformed. The earliest reference to “Reformed Baptist” one is able to find dates to about 1826.<sup>14</sup> It is certainly not a seventeenth-century expression. Indeed, it seems to have become a widely used expression only after World War II.

Nevertheless, despite the early ambiguities in the nomenclature, there were, by the early 1520s, perceptible differences between the Protestant theology emanating from Wittenberg and that from Zürich. The latter were speaking of the Lord’s Supper differently than the Wittenberg theologians. Underlying that rhetoric was a different way of relating the two natures of Christ.<sup>15</sup> Those differences manifested themselves and were sharpened in the heated pamphlet war between the Zürichers and the Lutherans on these questions. In 1530, when the various Protestant churches presented their confessions to Charles V at Augsburg, there was an observable distinction between the Swiss Reformed and the Lutheran. The Swiss Reformed *Tetrapolitan Confession* was distinct from the Lutheran *Augsburg Confession*.

<sup>12</sup> “Nam Iohannes Hussus, Hieronymus Pragensis, Lutherus, Zwinglius, Oecolampadius, Bucerus, caeterique reformatae Ecclesiae antesignani, aut doctores fuerunt apud vos, aut ecclesiae ministri: quibus in ecclesia & schola sacras literas docendi & errores refutandi munus fuit demandatum.” Franciscus Gormarus, *Anti-costeri libri tres: seu enchiridii controversarium praecipuarum nostri temporis in religione, à Francisco Costero D. Theologiae Soc. Iesu conscripti*. (Amsterdam, 1599; repr. 1644), 196.

<sup>13</sup> Schaff, *Creeds*, 3.419.

<sup>14</sup> There is a note about a meeting of the Kehukee Baptist Association that refers to “a paper purporting to be a declaration of the Reformed Baptist Churches in North-Carolina, dated 26th August, 1826, which was handed into our last Association.” *North Carolina Free Press* (Saturday 24 November 1827), 4. I am indebted to an anonymous correspondent for this reference.

<sup>15</sup> See R. Scott Clark, *Caspar Olevian and the Substance of the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), 104–136.

Gradually, through the succeeding decades, the Reformed and Lutheran traditions consolidated their own theology, piety, and practice and that consolidation came to expression in confessions and catechisms, for example, The *Anglican Articles* (1553, 1562), *French Confession* (1559), the *Scots Confession* (1560), the *Belgic Confession* (1561), the *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563), and the *Second Helvetic Confession* (1566), to name but a few. This period has even been denominated by some historians as “the confessional period.” By the 1550s, the main lines of what constituted the Reformed confession were quite clear. Both the Lutherans and the Reformed had much in common, whatever they might have said in the heat of polemics over the Lord’s Supper or Christology. What is of interest here, however, is that the Lutherans in Wittenberg were quite conscious of holding views and practices that distinguished themselves from the Reformed, whom they called “sacramentarians.”<sup>16</sup> In the subsequent decades that trajectory, the delineation of an identifiable theology, piety, and practice continued. The so-called Gnesio Lutherans, that is, the genuine Lutherans moved even farther away from the Reformed and consolidated their theology, piety, and practice in the *Formula of Concord* (1577) and the *Book of Concord* (1580). To the *Liber Concordiae*, Theodore Beza et al. responded with the *Harmony of Confessions* (1580).<sup>17</sup> Reformed confession-writing continued with the *Canons of Dort*, adopted in 1619 in response to the Remonstrants. We might consider the confessional age to have closed with the publication of the Westminster Standards (1647–1648). There was, in the mind of the orthodox Lutheran and Reformed churches and theologians, through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, little ambiguity about the substance of what Reformed churches confessed.

Nearly ten years after the publication of *Recovering the Reformed Confession* (hereafter, *RRC*),<sup>18</sup> I am grateful for the opportunity to interact with Crawford Gribben, Chris Caughey, and Matthew C. Bingham, and to reconsider the program of the book. Gribben and Caughey raise the question whether there is even such a thing as a “Reformed

<sup>16</sup> See *Epitome of the Formula of Concord*, VII in Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Mühlenberg Press, 1959), 482.

<sup>17</sup> *Harmonia confessionum fidei orthodoxarum et reformatarum ecclesiarum* (Geneva, 1581).

<sup>18</sup> R. Scott Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession: Our Theology, Piety, and Practice* (Philipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2008).

confession” and seek to deconstruct the category “Reformed.” Bingham, on the other hand, seeks to change the terms of discussion somewhat, from the Reformed confession defined narrowly as the Word of God as confessed by the Reformed Churches to what he calls the “nebulous and fluid” category of the “Reformed tradition.” He argues that if we consider the breadth of the Reformed tradition, it is neither anachronistic nor oxymoronic to speak of Reformed Baptists. Let me address Bingham’s proposal first.

## I

Bingham recognizes that the initial and sustained response by the English Reformed was to characterize the emerging Particular Baptist churches as disingenuous and as crypto-Anabaptists. The question before us is whether they were correct or whether they, for whatever reason, overreacted?

It is certainly true that the Particular Baptists were not like the Anabaptists in important ways. Unlike the Anabaptists, the Particular Baptists had an orthodox Christology, that is, they did not confess the “Celestial Flesh” Christology.<sup>19</sup> In distinction from the Anabaptists, they received the Protestant soteriology of salvation *sola gratia, sola fide*. This much is clear from the First London Confession (1644) and the Second (1677, 1689).<sup>20</sup> The Particular Baptists strongly disavowed any connection with the Anabaptists.<sup>21</sup> Yet, for the Reformed, the lines were blurry. When the Netherlands Reformed Churches met in Synod in 1586, about 25 years before the Baptist movements began to emerge, they used “Baptist” as a synonym for Anabaptist. In an appendix to the church order of 1586, the Synod addressed the question of how to respond to a case in which a

<sup>19</sup> It was to this Christology that the Belgic Confession responded in art. 18. See Schaff, *Credentials*, 3.402–403. This Christology was confessed by Menno Simmon, Dirk Philips, Melchior Hoffmann, and Caspar Schwenkfeld. See Alvin J. Beachy, *The Concept of Grace in the Radical Reformation* (Nieuwkoop: B. DeGraaf, 1977), 14, n.32, 79–86. *The Concept of Cologne* (1591) an Anabaptist confession in the tradition of Menno seems to reflect this Christology in art. 2. See Pelikan and Hotchkiss, 751. See also Dietrich Philips, *The Church of God* (1560) in George Hunston Williams ed. *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*. The Library of Christian Classics, vol. 25 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), 236–237.

<sup>20</sup> See First London Confession, art. 16, 21–28; Second London Confession, ch 11. Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 4.279–281; 546–547.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, “The Narrative of the 1689 General Assembly” in James M. Renihan, ed., *Faith and Life for Baptists: Documents of the London Particular Baptist Assemblies, 1689–1694* (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2016), 52–53.

man had an infant “taken” from him by “the Baptists” (*de Doopers*), who allegedly offered to return the infant to the father only on condition that he promise not to have it baptized.<sup>22</sup> From the Reformed side, anyway, the Baptists were difficult to distinguish from the Anabaptists even before the Baptists existed as a distinct movement.

Bingham’s analysis ignores one very significant way in which the Particular Baptists agreed with the Anabaptists, on the nature of the covenant of grace and baptism. He mistakes the Reformed insistence on paedobaptism as an indicator that they have made it the only real mark of the church. He is following a line of argumentation suggested by the Baptist divines at the 1689 General Assembly. They wrote, “[a]nd although we do differ from our brethren who are Paedobaptists; in the subject and administration of Baptisme.”<sup>23</sup> The Reformed and the Particular Baptists certainly disagree over those things, but they disagree over rather more. They disagree over what the fundamental issue between them is.

In contrast to the Particular Baptists, the Reformed consensus on baptism was a reflection of the Reformed consensus on the nature of the covenant of grace.<sup>24</sup> In the context of the Zürich controversy with the Anabaptists, Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531) was working out the Reformed view of the continuity of the covenant of grace variously administered in redemptive history in his 1525 treatise, *On Baptism*.<sup>25</sup> There, he appealed to promises made to Abraham and to his children.<sup>26</sup> In his 1527

<sup>22</sup> “18. Es gheproponerdt van een parsoon tott Leijden, den welcken de Doopers sijn kindt ende wijff weghghenoomen hadden, ende willen hem sijn kindt niet weederghieven, t’en sij dat hij beloove, dat hij ‘t en sall laten doopen, ende wordt ghedreijghdt van sijn huusvrouwe, hem geheel te willen verlaaten etc.” P. Biesterveld and H. H. Kuiper, *Kerkelijke Handboekje* (Kampen: J. H. Bos, 1905), 219; “The Church Orders of the 16th-Century Reformed Churches of the Netherlands Together with their Social, Political, and Ecclesiastical Context,” trans. and collated by Richard R. Ridder with the assistance of Rev. Peter H. Jonker and Rev. Leonard Verduin (Grand Rapids: Calvin Theological Seminary, 1987), 364. In distinction, the Dutch Reformed referred to the Anabaptists as “De wederdoopereren.” See Biesterveld and Kuiper, 87.

<sup>23</sup> Renihan, ed., *Faith and Life*, 281.

<sup>24</sup> On the history of covenant theology, see R. Scott Clark, “Christ and Covenant: Federal Theology in Orthodoxy,” in Herman Selderhuis, ed., *Companion to Reformed Orthodoxy* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 403–428.

<sup>25</sup> Huldreich Zwingli, *Von der Taufe ...* in (Zürich, 1525) in *Huldreich Zwinglis Sämtliche Werke* (Münich: Kraus Reprint, 1981), 4.206–337 (CR 91); Huldrych Zwingli, *On Baptism* in *Zwingli and Bullinger*, The Library of Christian Classics vol. 14, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), 129–175.

<sup>26</sup> *On Baptism*, 138.

*Refutation of the Tricks of the Catabaptists*,<sup>27</sup> Zwingli responded point-by-point to the 1527 *Schleitheim Confession*. In the words of Ulrich Gaebler,

There were no discernible shifts from his earlier statements, except that he now supported his argument that children already belong to God by elaborating the covenant idea: God renewed with Abraham the same covenant he had made with Noah; he commanded Abraham to circumcise, as a sign that even children too young to understand and are included in this covenant. The same covenant God had thus made with Israel he also made with Christians, so as to render them and Israel one people and one church. A single covenant unites the Old and the New Testaments—only a relative difference separates them.<sup>28</sup>

He continued this approach in his account written in 1530 for Charles V, *Fidei Ratio*.<sup>29</sup>

His successor as *Antistes*, Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), in his 1534 treatise against the Anabaptists, *De testamento seu foedere dei unico et aeterno* (Zürich, 1534), elaborated on Zwingli's approach.<sup>30</sup> As Zwingli had done, Bullinger appealed to the essential unity of the covenant of grace and to God's promise to Abraham (Genesis 17) to be a God to him and to his seed.<sup>31</sup> He refuted the Anabaptists on the grounds of the promise and upon the identity of the seed. For Bullinger, the promise was essentially a *spiritual* promise administered in redemptive history, in the visible covenant community, through types and shadows.<sup>32</sup> The new covenant is the fulfillment of the promises made in the Abrahamic covenant and administered (not merely anticipated) in redemptive history.<sup>33</sup> For Bullinger there is but one covenant and he turned to the Abrahamic expression as his summary.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *In catabaptistarum strophas elenchus* in *Zwingli's Werke*, 6.1 (CR 93). 1–196.

<sup>28</sup> Ulrich Gaebler, *Huldrych Zwingli: His Life and Work*, trans. Ruth C. L. Gritsch (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), 129.

<sup>29</sup> See *Zwingli's Werke* 6.2 (CR 93) (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich) (1968; repr. 1982), 799.22–806.5.

<sup>30</sup> Translated as *A Brief Exposition of the One and Eternal Testament of God* in Charles S. McCoy and J. Wayne Baker, *Fountainhead of Federalism: Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenantal Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991).

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Bullinger, *De testamento*, 5–10.

<sup>32</sup> Bullinger, *De testamento*, 9, 12b.

<sup>33</sup> Bullinger, *De testamento*, 21b–24b.

<sup>34</sup> Bullinger, *De testamento*, 24b–25.

At least two of the Heidelberg Reformers, Zacharias Ursinus (1534–1583) and Caspar Olevianus (1536–1587), studied in Zürich with Bullinger. In one of the two catechisms he drafted in preparation for what would become the *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563), Ursinus wrote about the relationship between Abraham and new covenant Christians:

When Moses speaks to the people of Israel does he also address us?

No less than he did them. First, because God did then for the first time make known the law in the Decalogue, but repeated and clarified for the people of Israel not only what he required of them but also that for which all rational creatures were created. Second, we are the spiritual sons of Abraham and Israel who have been ingrafted into Christ, who is the natural seed of Abraham.<sup>35</sup>

That new covenant believers participate in the new administration of the same covenant made with Abraham was basic to Ursinus' understanding of redemptive history. This is even clearer in his explanation of the nature of sacraments in general. The question was, "How does the Lord say that the bread is his body and the wine his blood?" The answer begins with the nature of the relationship between signs (sacraments) and realities (*res*) generally, but appeals to the institution of the "covenant of circumcision" under Abraham as an example of the nature of Christian sacraments.<sup>36</sup> He made the same sorts of arguments in his *Corpus doctrinae*, in his exposition of Heidelberg 71 and again under 74.<sup>37</sup>

His colleague, Caspar Olevianus (1536–1587) elaborated on the same approach in *De substantia foederis gratuiti inter deum et electos* (Geneva, 1585). The entire work is a sustained appeal to the continuity of the covenant of grace between Abraham and the New Covenant.<sup>38</sup> The first passage to which he appealed, on the opening page of the work, was Jeremiah 31, which he understood to contrast the old, Mosaic covenant with the New Covenant, which he took as a renewal of the Abrahamic covenant

<sup>35</sup> Zacharias Ursinus, *Summa theologiae in D. zachariae ursini opera theologi ... opera theologica*, 3 vol. (Frankfurt, 1612) 1.22; Lyle D. Bierma, et al., *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History, and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 192.

<sup>36</sup> Ursinus, *Opera*, 1.32.

<sup>37</sup> Zacharias Ursinus, *Corpus doctrinae orthodoxae* (Heidelberg, 1616), 363, 373–376.

<sup>38</sup> He appealed to or cited Abraham as the paradigm for and example of the covenant of grace 47 times.

without the types and shadows.<sup>39</sup> The basis of the entire work was the distinction between the *substance* of the covenant, which Olevianus defined in Abrahamic terms, “I will circumcise your heart and that of your children,” quoting Deuteronomy 30 and citing Genesis 17, and the external administration of the covenant of grace, that is, its *accidents*.<sup>40</sup>

We are not surprised, then, to see *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563) 19 appealing to the continuity of the gospel generally as that revealed in paradise, proclaimed by the holy patriarchs (including Abraham) and prophets, foreshadowed by the sacrifices and ceremonies under Moses, and finally fulfilled by his well-beloved Son.<sup>41</sup> The ground of infant baptism is this understanding of the continuity of the Abrahamic covenant. The children of believers ought to be baptized because “they, as well as their parents, belong to the [Abrahamic] covenant and people of God.”<sup>42</sup> Of course, the *Belgic Confession* (1561) article 34 had made the very same argument:

Therefore we detest the error of the Anabaptists, who are not content with the one only baptism they have once received, and moreover condemn the baptism of the infants of believers, who, we believe, ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant, as the children in Israel formerly were circumcised upon the same promises which are made unto our children.<sup>43</sup>

When the Westminster Divines (1648) confessed in 7:5,

this Covenant [of grace] was differently administered in the time of the Law, and in the time of the Gospel, it was administered by Promises, Prophecies, Sacrifices, Circumcision, the Paschal Lamb, and other Types and Ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all fore-signifying Christ to come. ... Under the Gospel, when Christ the substance was exhibited,

they were summarizing the received, basic understanding of the covenant of grace, which the Reformed had been articulating since the early 1520s.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Olevianus, *De substantia*, 1–3.

<sup>40</sup> Olevianus, *De substantia*, 2–3.

<sup>41</sup> Schaff, *Creeds*, 3.313.

<sup>42</sup> Schaff, *Creeds*, 3.331.

<sup>43</sup> Schaff, *Creeds*, 3.428.

<sup>44</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith (1648), 7.5,6 in *The Humble Advice of the Assembly of Divines Now By Authority of Parliament Sitting at Westminster: An Original Facsimile* (Audubon, NJ: Old Paths Publications), 16.

When, in the mid-seventeenth century, the Reformed churches and theologians were confronted with the Particular Baptists, they analyzed them as Anabaptists because they saw in them *essentially* the same covenant theology, despite the assurances by the Particular Baptists of their sympathy with the Reformed.<sup>45</sup> At key points the Particular Baptists did not affirm and could not affirm the Reformed view that the covenant of grace is *substantially* one administered variously in redemptive history. After all, neither the First London Confession (1644) nor the Second London (1677, 1689) use this, by now, traditional Reformed language. The First London used the term covenant six times (in chapters 10, 12, 15, 29, 30, 34).<sup>46</sup> The use in chapter 10 has reference to the *pactum salutis* and to the “New Covenant,” but not to the Abrahamic covenant. Chapter 12 seems to assume the *pactum salutis* and makes Christ the fulfillment of the covenant promise, but again, without reference to the Abrahamic promise. In chapter 15 Christ is the “Angel of the Covenant,” but again, without reference to the Abrahamic promise. Chapters 29, 30, and 34 make reference only to the “New Covenant.” In the Second London, the only reference to Abraham in the body of the confession occurs in 8.2 regarding the incarnation and Christ as the seed of Abraham.<sup>47</sup> According to Richard Lindberg, in the Second London, “there are no periods of redemptive history; law and Gospel overlap ... No space is given to the administration of the covenant.”<sup>48</sup> The most extensive attention given in the Second London to the Abrahamic covenant occurred in “An Appendix.” There when it spoke of the “Covenant that God made with Abraham and his Seed,” the function of the invocation was to highlight the *discontinuity* between the Abrahamic covenant with the New Covenant. It focused attention upon the temporary and typological aspects of the Abrahamic covenant and treated it not as a species of the covenant of grace, but implicitly as a covenant of works.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, the preface to the reader to the Second London (1689) in Renihan, ed., *Faith and Life*, 213–216 and *An Appendix* [to the Second London Confession], in *ibid.*, 281–282.

<sup>46</sup> See James M. Renihan, ed. *True Confessions: Baptist Documents in the Reformed Family* (Owensboro, KY: Reformed Baptist Academic Publishing, 2004), 15–16, 18, 32–33, 36.

<sup>47</sup> Renihan, *True Confessions*, 96.

<sup>48</sup> Richard L. Lindberg, “The *Westminster* and the *Second London Confessions of Faith*: A Historical-Theological Comparison,” ThM Thesis (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1980), 45, 46.

<sup>49</sup> Renihan, ed., *Faith and Life*, 283–284.

Where the Second London addressed the covenant of grace specifically, the Baptist divines spoke differently than did the Westminster Divines. Where Westminster Confession 7:5 stresses the historical administration of the covenant of grace, in 7:3 the Second London moves from the revelation of the covenant of grace to Adam to its ground in the *pactum salutis*. This absence was also in contrast with 7:4 in the 1658 Savoy Declaration, which emphasized strongly the continuity of the covenant of grace despite the variety of administrations through redemptive history.<sup>50</sup>

In short, despite the substantial identity between the Particular Baptist confessions with the Reformed on several important points, at essential points, the Particular Baptists confess a different reading of redemptive history, one that has more in common with the Anabaptists than it does the Reformed.

Bingham raises a number of other interesting questions, but let me address one in particular, the so-called “time machine test,” since it touches on one of the criticisms offered by Crawford Gribben and Chris Caughey, namely, whether the contemporary confessional Reformed churches have so drifted from the original understanding of the Reformed confession and the original relationship (i.e., the move from *quia* subscription to varieties of *quatenus* subscription) that they too would flunk the “time machine test.” In *RRC* I offered a challenge to the then emerging Young, Restless, and Reformed Movement to consider their relations to the historic Reformed tradition. Were they to appear at the Synod of Dort or the Westminster Assembly, *mutatis mutandis*, would they be recognized as Reformed?

All three critics raise the problem of the American Presbyterian revisions of the Westminster Standards. Is it true that no longer confessing that the Pope is Antichrist or no longer having a state church would disqualify the American Presbyterian and Reformed Churches as Reformed? I anticipated this objection in *RRC*. My argument is that we still hold the same doctrine of Scripture, God, Man, Christ, Salvation, Church, Sacraments, and Eschatology. The evidence for this claim seems overwhelming. Where we have come largely to differ with our forebears is on a particular ethical inference. This revision of Reformed ethics is not of the substance of the faith. We still hold and confess the same view of the moral law and its application to the Christian life. As I noted in *RRC*, many of them would be surprised to find that none of us holds to geocentrism, but

<sup>50</sup> Renihan, *True Confessions*, 93.

the Reformed confession does not require us to be obscurantist nor does it require us to put heretics to the stake. As Gribben and Caughey note, Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) made powerful and persuasive arguments from Scripture and history, which ultimately persuaded most of the confessional churches in the Dutch Reformed tradition that the state church was unbiblical and even contrary to our confession in certain ways. One easily perceives in the church orders of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a palpable tension between the desire of the churches and ministers to be Reformed and the countervailing desire of the Erasmian and Erastian civil authorities to retard that movement.

## II

In their critique, Caughey and Gribben seek to deconstruct the very idea that there is such a thing as a Reformed confession, as if to say, if they cannot be Reformed, then let there be no such thing. What would constitute a successful deconstruction? They should have to demonstrate that, upon consideration, there are so few particulars under the universal “Reformed” that there can no longer be said to be such a thing. D. G. Hart’s *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham* (2004) is an example of such a deconstruction. I doubt that Gribben and Caughey have met this test.

That there is a body of Reformed and Presbyterian churches with a distinct history, tradition, theology, piety, and practice and that there is a distinct body of Reformed confessions that cohere sufficiently to allow them to be collected is the premise behind, for example, the *Harmonia confessionum* (1581), the *Corpus et syntagma confessionum fidei* (1612), the *Confessiones fidei ecclesiarum reformatarum* (1635), the *Collectio confessionum in ecclesiis reformatarum* (1840), Schaff’s *Creeeds of Christendom* (1877), *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Reformierten Kirche* (1903), the collection of Reformed documents in Pelikan and Hotchkiss (2003), and most recently, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*, including 127 different documents from 1523 to 1693. This is by no means an exhaustive catalogue of such collections but only a representative sample of the major collections.<sup>51</sup> If we exclude the Baptist documents from this collection and confine ourselves to the Reformed confessions

<sup>51</sup> For a survey of the older collections, see Schaff, *Creeeds*, 1.354–355.

and catechisms with ecclesiastical sanction, the unity among them is impressive and fairly evident.<sup>52</sup>

Between 1581 and 2014, editors and publishers have regularly collected ecclesiastically authorized collected documents that they believed to be sufficiently similar as to warrant being gathered together as documents confessing and representing the theology, piety, and practice of the Reformed churches. Second, each of these collections asserts the existence of ecclesiastical bodies known as Reformed (and Presbyterian) churches, who have confessed and who continue to confess these documents. In the judgment of the churches themselves, scholars of the tradition, and editors of such collections, there is a Reformed doctrine of Scripture, God, man, Christ, salvation, church, and sacraments. None of the revisions that have been adopted by ecclesiastical bodies that actually believe the historic confessions constitutes a material change to that coherent body of doctrine nor to the piety and practice of the Reformed churches. Of course, we must exclude those ecclesiastical bodies across the globe and in the United States that have so redefined their relationship to the confessions as to vitiate their authority and integrity. I addressed this question sufficiently in *RRC*.

Gribben and Caughey place most of their chips, as it were, on a single contention: the revisions of the confessions adopted by the American (and Dutch) Reformed and Presbyterian churches regarding the relationship of church and state are sufficient to deconstruct the Reformed confession. The argument implies that the Reformed confession is a house of cards that rests on the old theocratic or Constantinian model of church-state relations such that to remove that card causes the house to tumble. They allege repeatedly that the post-eighteenth century (American) Reformed churches have vitiated the Reformed confession by becoming “Anabaptists” (their word) on the relations of church and state.

Our critics are divided among themselves. One (Bingham) wants to redefine Reformed in order to admit the Baptists and the others want to deconstruct it. There are some interesting features to this argument. The argument supposes that there was a Reformed confession but argues that

<sup>52</sup> *Corpus et syntagma confessionum fidei* (Geneva, 1612); *Confessiones fidei ecclesiarum reformatarum* (Leiden, 1635); H. A. Niemeyer, ed., *Collectio confessionum in ecclesis reformatarum* (Leipzig, 1840); E. F. Karl Müller ed., *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Reformierten Kirche* (Zürich: Theologische Buchhandlung, 1903); Pelikan and Hotchkiss, 2.207–662; James T. Dennison, Jr., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*, 4 vol. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008–2014).

there is no such thing now. It seems to assume a sort of American hegemony that is not self-evident. My students and colleagues from Nigeria, South Korea, and Brazil, to name but three places where the Reformed churches are flourishing, would be shocked to learn that decisions taken by the American and Dutch churches in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries have destroyed the Reformed confession.

Second, there is imprecision in the discussion of the relations between the Reformed confession, theocracy, and theonomy. There is no doubt that the Reformed churches inherited the assumption behind Christendom, the church-state complex that governed Europe and the British Isles for most of a millennium. Inasmuch as the Reformed were universally agreed that there must be a state church and that the state must enforce religious orthodoxy with civil punishments, we may call them (somewhat imprecisely) “theocrats.” We may not accurately call them “theonomists,” however, which is that novelty proposed by the likes of Rousas J. Rushdoony (1916–2001) and Greg L. Bahnsen (1948–1995), et al.<sup>53</sup> The theonomists proposed, as Bahnsen put it, “the abiding validity of the [civil] law in exhaustive detail.” Rushdoony’s relationship to the Reformed confession was tenuous so it is doubtful that his theories have much to do with Reformed theology, piety, or practice.<sup>54</sup> We must add the modifier *civil* to Bahnsen’s proposal since it was the civil law, not the ceremonial nor the moral law, that was at issue. There were many great difficulties with this program, chief among them their rejection of the threefold distinction in the Mosaic law, which all the Protestants accepted.<sup>55</sup> Further, the theonomists contradicted all the Reformed theologians and churches who rejected the abiding validity of the civil law. In their Confession of Faith, the Westminster divines addressed this specifically: “To them [national Israel], as a body politque, he gave sundry Judicial Laws, which expired together with the State of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require.”<sup>56</sup> It is difficult to imagine how the

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, 3 vol. (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1982–1999); Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Nutley, NJ: Craig Press, 1977).

<sup>54</sup> See Michael J. McVicar, *Christian Reconstruction: R. J. Rushdoony and American Religious Conservatism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

<sup>55</sup> On what Beza called the “*triplex divisio legis*,” see Philip Ross, *From the Finger of God: The Biblical and Theological Basis for the Threefold Division of the Law* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2010).

<sup>56</sup> *Humble Advice*, 33.

divines might have rejected the very heart of the theonomic proposal more directly or completely.

This leaves two final questions: (1) Is theocracy (as defined earlier) so of the essence of the Reformed confession that to reject it is to vitiate the confession? and (2) have the Reformed effectively adopted “the Anabaptist” view of church and state? Let us address the latter. The Anabaptist movements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were variegated and it seems unwarranted to write of “the Anabaptist” view of church and state. Indeed, there are precious few things on which all the Anabaptists agreed except their anti-Protestant soteriology and their view of the covenant of grace and baptism, the last of which the Particular Baptists have adopted. Unlike the substantial harmony of Reformed confessions, there is no harmony of Anabaptist confessions; neither may one turn to a single document, for example, the Schleithem Confession (1527) to represent all Anabaptists. To do so would be to misrepresent both the Anabaptist traditions and their own confessional allegiances (or lack thereof). For instance, Hans Denck (c.1500–1527), in his *Confession Before the Nuremberg Council* (1523), confessed nothing about the state,<sup>57</sup> neither did Balthasar Hubmaier’s *A Christian Catechism* (1536),<sup>58</sup> nor did the *Concept of Cologne* (1591).<sup>59</sup>

The Swiss Brethren, who signed the Schleithem, confessed (in article 6) that a Christian may not serve as a magistrate and the magistrate may not enforce religious orthodoxy and (in article 7) that Christians may not swear oaths for any purpose.<sup>60</sup> The Mennonite *Short Confession of Faith* (1610) and the *Dordrecht Confession* (1632) continued the tradition of the Schleithem on civil life and oaths.<sup>61</sup> If, however, we consider the entirety of early Anabaptist history, we see stark contradictions of that confession. Thomas Müntzer (1489–1525) was a significant leader in the Anabaptist movements who, in his 1524 sermon on Daniel 2, virtually commanded the Elector Saxony to enforce religious orthodoxy.<sup>62</sup> By Easter 1525, we find him at the vanguard of a widespread and violent peasant revolt in Thuringia and the Black Forest seeking to realize his eschatological vision by force. The violent Münster rebellion (1533–1536) was not led by theocratic Reformed folk but by Anabaptists. The Reformed rejected both the

<sup>57</sup> Pelikan and Hotchkiss, 2.667–672.

<sup>58</sup> Pelikan and Hotchkiss, 2.676–695.

<sup>59</sup> Pelikan and Hotchkiss, 2.753–754.

<sup>60</sup> Pelikan and Hotchkiss, 699–703.

<sup>61</sup> Pelikan and Hotchkiss, 766–777; 781–782.

<sup>62</sup> See Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Thomas Müntzer: Apocalyptic Mystic and Revolutionary*, trans. Jocelyn Jaquiere (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), 123.

Schleitheim's call for disengagement from civil life *and* the Anabaptist vision of a theocratic golden age on the earth.<sup>63</sup> It seems most accurate to say that since the eighteenth century, many Reformed and Presbyterian churches have come to agree with some aspects of the Mennonite critique of Christendom, but the history of the Reformed reconsideration of Christendom is complex and one could certainly not draw a straight line from Menno to Abraham Kuyper's critique of Christendom.

Finally, does the post-eighteenth-century Reformed and Presbyterian rejection, in some places, of theocratic politics fatally undermine the Reformed confession? Our critics have not made their case. First, they have confused a revision of Christian ethics with a rejection of the substance of the Reformed confession. Again, *RRC* anticipated this question but let us consider briefly the revisions of *Belgic Confession* (1561) article 36 and *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1648), chapter 23. We begin with WCF 23. Articles 1–2, and 4 are unchanged by the revisions. Only article 3 is at issue, and then only part:

yet he hath Authority, and it is his duty, to take order that Unity and Peace be preserved in the Church, that the Truth of God be kept pure, and intire; that all Blasphemies and Heresies be suppressed; all corruptions and abuses in Worship and Discipline prevented or reformed; and all the Ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed.<sup>64</sup>

In *Belgic Confession* the linchpin is this section of article 36<sup>65</sup>:

For their office is not only to have regard unto and watch for the welfare of the [civil] polity,<sup>66</sup> but also to maintain the true sacred ministry<sup>67</sup>; and thus may remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship; that the kingdom of anti-Christ may be thus destroyed and the kingdom of Christ promoted.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>63</sup>“Damnamus praeterea Iudaica somnia, quod ante iudicii diem aureum in terris sit futurum seculum, et pii regna mundi occupaturi, oppressis suis hostibus impiis. Nam evangelica veritas Matth. 24. et 25. Luc. item 18 et Apostolica doctrina 2 Thess. 2. et in 2. ad Tim. 3. et. 4. capite, longe aliud perhibere inveniuntur.” *Confessio helvetica posterior*, (1562), chapter 11 in Müller ed., *Die Bekenntnisschriften*, 185.3–6.

<sup>64</sup>*Humble Advice*, 42.

<sup>65</sup>Translated from the French text in Schaff, *Creeeds*, 3.432–433 and the Latin text as adopted by the Synod of Dort (1619) in Müller, *Die Bekenntnisschriften*, 248.

<sup>66</sup>French, “sur la police.” Latin, “pro conservandea politia.” The reference here is clearly to the civil, not ecclesiastical, polity; hence the editorial insertion.

<sup>67</sup>The Latin has “verum etiam ut sacrum tueantur Ministerium.”

<sup>68</sup>French, “maintenir.” Latin, “tuentur,” which Schaff translates as “protect.” The 1976 CRC edition follows this. This is possible from either the French or the Latin, but both could

For their argument to hold, Gribben and Caughey must show in detail how the revisions have substantially changed the Reformed confessions. Vague suggestions of conflicts between the confessions notwithstanding, despite the post-eighteenth-century rejection of theocracy, the Reformed churches confess, for example, the very same doctrines of the covenant of works (7:1–2) and the covenant of grace (7:3–6).

The Reformed churches are able to revise ethical inferences without vitiating the system of doctrine because ethics are the product of the system of doctrine and not the reverse. Should the churches change the doctrine of God, that would necessarily produce changes throughout Reformed theology, piety, and practice, but there is no evidence nor any good reason to think that rejecting theocratic politics has the same effect.

Arguably there was inherent in classical Reformed theology a tension between what Calvin called the “*duplex regimen* in man” (*in homine*).<sup>69</sup> One is “*spirituale*,” for the “advancement of piety” (*ad pietatem*) and “for the worship of God” (*ad cultum Dei*).<sup>70</sup> The other is for “for the duty of humanity and civility” (*ad humanitatis et civilitatis officia*). One uses force, the other is a minister of God’s Word. Arguably, there was an inherent tension between the doctrine of a “twofold government” and a state church and the state enforcement of religious orthodoxy. One recent commentator on the Belgic Confession has suggested that Calvin’s “*duplex regimen*” doctrine appears there.<sup>71</sup> If this is so, the tension between that distinction and the theocratic principle in article 36 would want to be resolved. Arguably, that is what happened. Over time, after the Eighty Years War in the Netherlands, after the Thirty Years War, after the English Civil War, the French Wars of Religion, the Religious Wars in Ireland, a

also be translated with “support.” The first assumption here is almost certainly that public funds would be used to support the ministry.

<sup>69</sup> Joannis Calvini, *Opera selecta*, ed. P. Barth (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1926–1962), 4.294.5. Hereafter *OS*.

<sup>70</sup> *OS* 4.294.5–6.

<sup>71</sup> “By using this language, the Belgic Confession grounds the civil government in God’s goodness, not his grace, in creation, not redemption. God rules over all things, but in two different ways, as the two kingdoms doctrine of the Reformers expressed. This doctrine was that God rules what Calvin called the civil kingdom and what Luther called the kingdom of the left hand as creator and sustainer of temporal, earthly, and provisional matters, while he rules the spiritual kingdom or kingdom of the right hand (Calvin and Luther respectively) as creator, but especially as redeemer of the eschatological kingdom.” *Idem, With Heart and Mouth: An Exposition of the Belgic Confession* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Fellowship, 2008), 481.

regicide in the British Isles, and the uncomfortable imposition of state-enforced episcopacy upon American colonists, the successors of those who fled to the New World for (among other things) religious liberty had opportunity to rethink Christendom. Just as we rethought geocentrism in light of new evidence, first the Americans and then Kuyper reconsidered Christendom in light of centuries of religio-political strife.

By my light, the Reformed house stands in need of repair but she still has foundations, walls, and her confessing inhabitants are still living in and working around the old home place. So far she has survived attempted ecclesiocides (if you will) in the 1560s and 1570s in the Netherlands and France, the Enlightenment and Modernism in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, and *Deo volente*, she will survive late modern deconstructionism. For those of us who still live in her, she is not a house of cards but a house built on a divine promise: “For the promise is to you and to your children and to all those who are distant, as many as the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:39).

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