

ordained servant

January 2017

Union with
Christ



Ordained Servant Online

A Journal for Church Officers

E-ISSN 1931-7115

CURRENT ISSUE: UNION WITH CHRIST

JANUARY 2017

From the Editor

Beginning a new year always draws me to contemplating the tangible realities of an embodied life. While I am a fan and regular beneficiary of electronic media, I also seek to be alert to their liabilities. “Analog Elegy” is a brief reflection of what we are losing.

John Murray described union with Christ as covenantal, spiritual, vital, and mystical. “Nothing is more central or basic than union and communion with Christ. . . . [Union with Christ] underlies every step of the application of redemption.”¹ Those who wish to put a wedge between Calvin and his successors, on this or any other theological topic, will need to contend with John Fesko’s powerful argument to the contrary in his lead article this month, “Union with Christ and Reformed Orthodoxy: Calvin vs. the Calvinists?”

As we celebrate Luther’s epochal spiritual challenge in the nailing of his now famous Ninety-Five Theses to the Wittenberg Castle door 500 years ago in 1517, John Muether, our denominational historian, presents a chronological series of brief articles on the Reformed Confessions, beginning with “Zwingli’s Sixty-Seven Articles (1523).”

Danny Olinger continues his biography of Geerhardus Vos with Chapter 4: “Reformed Biblical-Theological Beginnings.” This is a thrilling account of one of the major contributors to the theology and life of our churches. Speaking of which Darryl Hart offers an informative and challenging inquiry into the relationship among mainstream culture, Presbyterianism, and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in “Presbyterians and the American Mainstream.” And don’t miss his review of Walter McDougall, *The Tragedy of U.S. Foreign Policy: How America’s Civil Religion Betrayed National Interest*—a challenge to the church’s alignment with American exceptionalism.

In honor of the early creeds spawned by the Reformation, Ryan McGraw reviews a new English translation of a seminal treatise of Reformed Scholasticism from 1625, *Synopsis of a Purer Theology*. It was composed by four professors of Leiden University (Johannes Polyander, Andreas Rivetus, Antonius Walaeus, and Anthonius Thysius). The price of this academic publication will prevent most of us from owning this volume, but *Ordained Servant* readers should be aware of it.

Finally, the superb Christina Rossetti has some useful thoughts for the new year in her poem “Old and New Year Ditties.”

Blessings in the Lamb,
Gregory Edward Reynolds

¹ John Murray, *Redemption—Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 161.

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Ordained Servant exists to help encourage, inform, and equip church officers for faithful, effective, and God-glorifying ministry in the visible church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Its primary audience is ministers, elders, and deacons of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, as well as interested officers from other Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Through high-quality editorials, articles, and book reviews, we will endeavor to stimulate clear thinking and the consistent practice of historic, confessional Presbyterianism.

Servant Thoughts

Analog Elegy

by Gregory E. Reynolds

When we moved into Chestnut Cottage in 1992, we kept the heavy black plastic and metal rotary telephone, with its sonorous bell ring, as a reminder of the historical and the material—the analog. Don't get me wrong, the digital has made me delirious with delight in its efficiencies. How many things I could not have written without those ephemeral letters and words, which even now I see, as I type, promise to be printed in hard copy. But I always feel that they are not my words, real words, until I print them out on paper and hold them in hand, fully incarnated. When they occupy space, when the slow swirl of the clock hands tell me time, I know that I am located in my embodied life. But with every screen I feel absorbed into a disembodied world, so unlike the world of resurrection in which I live and hope. I know what you're thinking, "He hates technology." No, I only fear its unintended consequences—its powerful allure to unreality and even idolatry. And it's not just a digital temptation; it is a technological one—the work of men's hands.

This is why I think cremation tells the wrong story, one of ephemeral efficiency, like the digital letters I hammer out on keys. Not that I would condemn those who prefer ashes that the wind floats away to flesh lowered into earth. This is a wisdom decision. I am just reflecting on the possible perils of efficiency, which is one of the main goals and benefits of electricity; we assume that efficiency is always good. It often turns out to be an autonomous ploy—worshipping the creation rather than the Creator.

Escape into virtual images that lack analog substance is borne out of fear of the realities of space and time, time that robs us of all sense of permanence and personal presence. The virtual inebriates us into the illusion of endless and perfect life—controllable—without need of redemption. In real life there is no such escape—so I understand the allure of that insubstantial dream. In this world, this rock-hard world, I must face my mortality, and the mess that Adam's disobedience has wreaked. The imagery of screens ill prepares me to be buried. And where will this leave me if I am not ready to breathe that last breath? In a dark shadow from which there is no exit. No wonder sociologist of technology Sherry Turkle laments the preference of so many for virtual reality (VR) instead of real life (RL). Her latest book's title says this well: *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (Basic, 2011).

The analog, as the lexicon reminds me, is itself an analogy of something else, something greater than the present world. God's "invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20). If I am seduced to ignore this analogy, how will I be moved to seek my Creator and Redeemer? The analog world is hard-edged since Adam's fall, and so, because of our native sinfulness, it invites us to seek a digital escape. But it also invites us, with its

combination of beauty and distress, to long for a better world, with memories of Eden embedded in it. The blossoming promises of spring make us long in the shroud of fall leaves for a flower that will not fade. A gravestone on Horse Corner Road in Chichester, New Hampshire, says it well:

Hope looks beyond the bounds of time
When what we now deplore
Will rise in full immortal prime
And bloom to fade no more.

So I cherish my analog world, not in itself, but for its prodding realism. “That at least, if goodness lead him not, yet weariness may toss him to my breast” (George Herbert, “The Pulley”). This is why God has withheld ultimate rest, his greatest treasure, from us all in this present existence. Weariness is built into God’s world so that we will not adore his gifts instead of him. We must not rest in the nature that he has given, but must love him above all and find our happiness in his glory. The analog world beckons us to this glorious end. We mustn’t let virtual reality rob us of this hope.

So in this new year rub shoulders with the members of your church, email a distant friend, or better yet, write a letter that incarnates your care, and maybe take up skiing or racket ball. Don’t seek some imaginary safe space, but rather seek the only true safe place in the universe: “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the LORD, ‘My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust’ ” (Ps. 91:1–2). He will enable you to face the challenges of the new year.

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Servant Truth

Union with Christ and Reformed Orthodoxy: Calvin vs. the Calvinists?

by John V. Fesko

Introduction

In the twentieth century, some historians claimed that Calvinists distorted the theology of their founder, John Calvin (1509–64), but they have been ably refuted through primary-source evidence. Reformed Orthodoxy, the label applied to post-Reformation Reformed theology, stands in doctrinal continuity with the theology of the Reformation.¹ But despite this trenchant critique of the Calvin versus the Calvinists thesis, the claim persists. In earlier versions of the Calvin versus the Calvinists argument, scholars pitted Calvin’s supposedly Christ-centered theology against the supposed central dogma of predestination (the principle from which the Reformed deduced their entire system of theology). Calvin had no such central dogma because he did not treat predestination under the doctrine of God, as the Reformed Orthodox did, but in book three of his *Institutes*, under the doctrine of soteriology. In these versions of the argument Calvin looks a lot like Karl Barth (1886–1968) rather than an Early Modern Reformed theologian. Nevertheless, Charles Partee suggested that union with Christ, not predestination, was Calvin’s “central affirmation.”² Partee presses this point in his later book on Calvin’s theology with a twofold claim. First, though many Reformed theologians contributed to the complex development of the tradition, Partee believes “we can still affirm John Calvin as the greatest systematic thinker among them.”³ Second, in line with his earlier claim, Partee claims that union with Christ is Calvin’s central teaching.⁴ Partee argues that Reformed Orthodoxy departed from Calvin’s teaching: “To put the point briefly and sharply, Calvin is not a Calvinist because union with Christ is at the heart of his theology—and not theirs.”⁵

In this essay, I argue the antithesis of Partee’s twofold claim: (1) that Calvin is neither the normative nor the greatest theologian of the Reformed tradition; and (2) that union with Christ lies at the heart of the soteriology of Reformed Orthodoxy as much or even more than Calvin.

¹ See, e.g., Richard A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Richard A. Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); R. Scott Clark and Carl R. Trueman, eds., *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006); Willem J. Van Asselt, *Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2011); Willem Van Asselt and Eef Dekker, *Reformation and Scholasticism: An Ecumenical Enterprise* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).

² Charles Partee, “Calvin’s Central Dogma Again,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 18, no. 2 (1987): 191–99, esp. 194.

³ Charles Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 3.

⁴ Partee, *Theology of John Calvin*, 16, 27.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

To prove this twofold thesis I briefly survey the views of three Reformed theologians: Girolamo Zanchi (1516–90), William Perkins (1558–1602), and Edward Leigh (1602–71). Each of these theologians places great emphasis upon the doctrine of union with Christ, revealing that it lies at the heart of his soteriology. But we will see that when they expound their doctrine, the overly simplistic rubric of Calvin versus the Calvinists inadequately explains the relationship between them and Calvin. Contrary to the claims of Partee, the Reformed tradition never made Calvin normative in any sense. Rather, Scripture and the confessions have always been normative. No one theologian ever gained ascendancy within early modernity, unlike the Lutheran tradition in which Martin Luther (1486–1546) serves as a fountainhead figure. The essay concludes with summary observations about the nature of the Reformed tradition and the doctrine of union with Christ.

Zanchi, Perkins, and Leigh

Girolamo Zanchi

Zanchi presents an excellent test case to demonstrate the inaccuracy of Partee's claims regarding Calvin and the Reformed tradition because of his reputation as a theologian as well as his direct interaction with Calvin. Zanchi was initially converted under the ministry of Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562) and was trained by him, but he also studied with Calvin at Geneva for ten months.⁶ In fact, Zanchi prepared a compendium of Calvin's 1543–45 *Institutes* for his personal use, which means he was intimately familiar with Calvin's theology.⁷ In Zanchi we have a theologian known for his Thomistic Scholastic precision but who also studied with Calvin at Geneva. Granted, Zanchi was a transitional figure as an Early Orthodox (1565–1630/40) theologian, but at the same time exhibits the characteristics that Partee finds incompatible with Calvin's theology. Zanchi employed the Scholastic method characteristic of High Orthodoxy (1630/40–1700).

Because of Zanchi's Scholastic tendencies, one might expect the doctrine of union with Christ to suffer atrophy in his theology given Partee's claims, but in fact the opposite is true. Calvin never gave the doctrine of union with Christ explicit structural significance in his theology. There is no locus, for example, dedicated to the doctrine in any of the editions of his *Institutes*. Theologians have constructed synthetic treatments of his doctrine of union based upon the various things that Calvin says about it as they lie scattered throughout his writings.⁸ Now while Zanchi never produced his own systematic treatment of doctrine like Calvin's *Institutes*, he nevertheless wrote a confession of faith that was supposed to supersede the widely accepted Second Helvetic Confession (1566), written by Zurich's Heinrich Bullinger (1504–75).

In one sense Zanchi's confession looks very similar to other comparable confessions of the period, such as the Gallican (1559), Belgic (1563), or the Second Helvetic. But on the other hand, Zanchi's confession stands out because he devotes a specific article exclusively to the doctrine of union with Christ. In chapter XII of his confession Zanchi provides the following title: "Of the true dispensation of the redemption, the salvation, and life, which is laid up in

⁶ Philip McNair, *Peter Martyr in Italy: An Anatomy of Apostasy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), 229; John Patrick Donnelly, "Italian Influences on the Development of Calvinist Scholasticism," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 7, no. 1 (1976): 88.

⁷ Girolamo Zanchi, *Compendium Praecipuorum Capturum Doctrinae Christianae*, in *Opera Theologica*, vol. 8 (Geneva: 1605), 621–828.

⁸ So, e.g., Partee, *Theology of John Calvin*, 40–43.

Christ alone, and therefore of the necessarie uniting and participation with Christ.”⁹ Zanchi then elaborates the doctrine in nineteen paragraphs. This chapter on union with Christ acts as the gateway to his soteriology from which he discusses the gospel, sacraments, faith, repentance, justification, free will, and good works, among other topics.¹⁰ So Zanchi’s emphasis upon union with Christ is arguably greater in comparison with Calvin’s own confession-writing efforts. Calvin contributed to the authorship of the Gallican Confession, but union with Christ does not feature as one of the structurally significant doctrines.¹¹

In addition to Zanchi’s confession, he devoted significant time to exegesis. Among his exegetical labors his commentary on Ephesians stands out because he wrote a number of doctrinal excurses throughout the work, including an excursus on union with Christ.¹² A translator deemed Zanchi’s excursus worthy for publication as a stand-alone work and published it in 1599 as *An Excellent and Learned Treatise of the Spiritual Marriage Between Christ and the Church*.¹³ Once again, Zanchi stands out in comparison to Calvin. The second-generation Genevan reformer never produced a treatise or wrote a dedicated doctrinal locus or excursus on union with Christ. This is not to say that Calvin was therefore deficient, but rather raises the question of whether Partee’s analysis of Calvin’s devotion to the doctrine is accurate, especially when we see the amount of attention Zanchi gives it. Moreover, it also dispels Partee’s characterization of Reformed Orthodoxy, or in Partee’s term, Calvinism. According to Partee, Reformed Orthodoxy manifested the inappropriately confident spirit of Scholasticism, which produced enhanced logical rigor at the expense of theological insight.¹⁴ In other words, the Reformed Orthodox paid greater attention to system and less to exegesis and christology. But Zanchi’s excursus arose during his exegetical labors, which presents *prima facie* evidence that Zanchi’s Scholastic precision did not diminish his exegetical fidelity or his theological insight. In fact, the opposite is true—his Scholasticism drove him to expound the doctrine with greater historical depth, theological clarity, and exegetical precision.

What is interesting about Zanchi’s excursus on union with Christ are the sources that he quotes. The impression one gets from some historians such as Partee is that Calvin forged the doctrine of union with Christ on the anvil of his own biblical exegesis and doctrinal insight and subsequent generations cast aside his work.¹⁵ To be sure, traces of Calvin’s doctrine of union with Christ appear in Zanchi. In his confession, Zanchi explains: “That we cannot be united unto Christ, unlesse he first unite himself to us.”¹⁶ This sounds like Calvin’s famous statement from book III: “So long as we are without Christ and separated from him, nothing which he suffered and did for the salvation of the human race is of the least benefit to us. To communicate to us the blessings which he received from the Father, he must become ours and

⁹ Girolamo Zanchi, *De Religione Christiana Fides—Confession of Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. Luca Baschera and Christian Moser (Leiden: Brill, 2007), XII (vol. I, p. 231). Note, this is a Latin-English edition that provides the 1588 and 1601 Latin editions and the 1599 English translation. I cite the 1599 English translation in this and subsequent quotations.

¹⁰ Zanchi, *De Religione*, XIII-XXI (vol. I, pp. 253–370).

¹¹ See French Confession (1559–71), in *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, vol. 2, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 372–86.

¹² Girolamo Zanchi, *De Coniugio Spirituali Inter Christum & Ecclesiam*, in *Commentarius in Epistolam Sancti Pauli Ad Ephesos*, 2 vols., ed. A. H. Hartog, Bibliotheca Reformata, vols. 5–6 (Amsterdam: Joannes Adam Wormser, 1888), I:332–82.

¹³ Girolamo Zanchi, *An Excellent and Learned Treatise of the Spiritual Marriage Between Christ and the Church* (Cambridge: 1592).

¹⁴ Partee, *Theology of John Calvin*, 14.

¹⁵ Partee, *Theology of John Calvin*, 19 n65.

¹⁶ Zanchi, *De Religione*, XII.iv (vol. I, 233).

dwell in us.”¹⁷ But at the same time, Zanchi looked beyond Calvin to construct his own doctrine of union with Christ. He cites many patristic theologians, including Cyril of Alexandria (ca. 378–444) and Hilary of Poitiers (ca. 300–ca. 368).¹⁸ Zanchi’s citations demonstrate that union with Christ was not a doctrine unique to Calvin but was rather part of their common catholic heritage. Moreover, Zanchi refined his doctrine of union with Christ in the fiery disputes over the Lord’s Supper between the Reformed and the Lutherans during his time in Strasbourg.¹⁹ Zanchi appealed to multiple sources to prove that the Reformed understanding of the supper and its broader doctrinal context of union with Christ was catholic rather than unique to Calvin and did so by supporting his doctrine both from Scripture and ancient sources.

William Perkins

Similar patterns unfold in other Reformed theologians, such as William Perkins. Perkins was a leading theologian in the late sixteenth century and wielded significant influence among the students he instructed while at the University of Cambridge and through the publication of his works.²⁰ In our own day Perkins is probably better known for his famous ocular catechism, or his chart that illustrated the causes of salvation and damnation. Some have characterized this chart as a graphic to explain the doctrine of the decree while others have more accurately described it as a schematized order of salvation.²¹ Even then, if it is a schematized order of salvation, in a similar fashion to Partee, some have claimed that the introduction of the *ordo salutis* represents a significant Scholastic deviation from and vitiation of Calvin’s theology of union with Christ.²² Reformed Orthodoxy traded the gold of Calvin’s doctrine of union with Christ for the fool’s gold of the *ordo salutis*. But I personally wonder how many critics have carefully examined Perkins’s infamous chart.

Perkins’s chart is admittedly visually cluttered but the one thing that confronts the reader is the importance of union with Christ. Perkins lists the golden chain: the decree of election, the love of God to the elect in Christ, effectual calling, justification, sanctification, glorification, and eternal life. In a second column, he connects effectual calling to faith, justification to the remission of sin and imputation of righteousness, and sanctification to mortification and vivification. But in the third and central column he lists the person and work of Christ: Christ the mediator of the elect, the holiness of his manhood, the fulfilling of the law, his accursed death, burial, bondage under the grave, resurrection, ascension, session at the right hand of God, and ongoing intercession. Perkins connects faith to every element of the central Christ-column and then other benefits to select elements of Christ’s work. He connects the remission of sins, for example, to Christ’s death, burial, bondage under the grave, and resurrection, whereas he links the imputation of righteousness to the holiness of his manhood and his

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 3.1.1.

¹⁸ Zanchi, *Spiritual Marriage*, 78–82.

¹⁹ Charles P. Arand, James A. Nestingen, and Robert Kolb, eds., *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of the Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 212–14.

²⁰ W. B. Patterson, *William Perkins and the Making of a Protestant England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

²¹ So, rightly, Richard A. Muller, “Perkins’ *A Golden Chaine*: Predestinarian System or Schematized *Ordo Salutis*?” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 9, no. 1 (1978): 69–81.

²² William B. Evans, *Imputation and Impartation: Union with Christ in American Reformed Theology* (Eugene, OR: Paternoster, 2008), 43–83, 264–66; Julie Canlis, “Calvin, Osiander and Participation in God,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6, no. 2 (2004): 169–84, esp. 174–82, 183 n55.

fulfillment of the law.²³ Regardless of the visual complexity of Perkins's chart, we should not lose sight of the fact that every benefit of redemption comes from the believer's union with Christ. This fact has not been lost on older scholarship, as Heinrich Hepppe (1820–79) in his *History of Pietism* claimed that for Perkins, the Christian life had to be directly connected to the crucified Christ and possession of him through fellowship and mystical union.²⁴ Similarly, R. Tudur Jones (1921–98) describes union with Christ as the “existential nerve of Puritan piety,” and he too draws attention to the patristic and medieval origins of the doctrine.²⁵ Once again, though derided as a distorter of Calvin's theology, Perkins does not fit Partee's description as one who abandoned the doctrine of union with Christ. Moreover, union and the order of salvation are not competing alternatives but rather different sides of the same coin.

Edward Leigh

A third noteworthy example appears in the theology of Edward Leigh, a polymath educated at Oxford University under William Pemble (1591–1623). Leigh published on numerous subjects including theology, and he served as a Member of Parliament during the Westminster Assembly.²⁶ In similar fashion to Zanchi, Leigh treats applied soteriology under the rubric of union with Christ: “Of Our Union and Communion with Christ, And our Spiritual Benefits by him, and some special Graces.”²⁷ In his opening comments Leigh rejects two different versions of the doctrine: “Some make our Union with Christ to be only a relative Union, others an essential personall Union, as if we were Godded with God, and Christed with Christ.” Leigh rejects these erroneous views, which characterized union with Christ as merely associative or the opposite extreme that he absorbed sinners into his divine essence.²⁸ Instead, Leigh argues the union is: real, mutual, spiritual, operative, intimate, and inseparable.²⁹

In the chapters that follow Leigh treats common elements of applied soteriology: effectual calling, which is the inception of our union with Christ, faith, communion with Christ, justification, and sanctification.³⁰ Leigh treats each of these categories, and many others, as different aspects of our union with Christ. Leigh's exposition bears similarities to Perkins's ocular catechism as he relates the aspects of our salvation to the various facets of Christ's person and work. Justification, for example, “is a Judicial Act of God the Father upon a beleiving sinner, whereby his sins being imputed to Christ, and Christ's righteousness to him, he is acquitted from sin and death, and accepted righteous to eternal life.”³¹ Sanctification, according to Leigh, “is a continued work of the Spirit flowing from Christ as the Head, purging a man from the image of *Adam*, and by degrees conforming us to the image of Christ.”³² Both benefits flow from union with Christ but in a different manner—in justification we receive Christ's imputed righteousness whereas in sanctification we receive the Spirit,

²³ William Perkins, *A Golden Chaine, or The Description of Theologie* (London: John Legate, 1597).

²⁴ Heinrich Hepppe, *Geschichte des Pietismus und der Mystik in der Reformirten Kirche* (Leiden: Brill, 1879), 224–26; Muller, *Christ and the Decree*, 131–32.

²⁵ R. Tudur Jones, “Union with Christ: The Existential Nerve of Puritan Piety,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 41, no. 2 (1990): 186–208, esp. 187, 191.

²⁶ “Edward Leigh,” in *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. XXXII, ed. Sidney Lee (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1892), 432–33.

²⁷ Edward Leigh, *A Systeme or Body of Divinity* (London: William Lee, 1654), VII, 485.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, VII.i, 487.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, VII.i, 487–88.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, VII.ii, 489ff.; iv, 499ff; v, 510ff; vi, 512ff.; xi, 530ff.

³¹ *Ibid.*, VII.vi, 512.

³² *Ibid.*, VII.xi (p. 531).

which flows from Christ as our head. Christ never recedes from the picture but is the source from which all the blessings of redemption stream.

But equally notable in Leigh's treatment of union with Christ are the numerous sources he cites: William Pemble, his tutor at Oxford, the Acts of the Synod of Dort, André Rivet (1572–1651), John Cameron (ca. 1579–1625), George Carleton (ca. 1557–1628), William Twisse (ca. 1577–1646), John Davenant (1572–1641), Augustine (354–430), George Gillespie (1613–48), Pierre Du Moulin (1568–1658), Jacob Alting (1618–79), Franciscus Gomarus (1563–1641), Martin Luther, Anthony Burgess (d. 1664), Thomas Gataker (1574–1654), Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), Daniel Featly (1582–1645), Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621), Jacob Arminius (1560–1609), John Cotton (1585–1652), Thomas Cartwright (1534–1603), Thomas Manton (1620–77), George Downam (ca. 1563–1634), Dudley Fenner (ca. 1558–87), and Andrew Willett (ca. 1561–1621). There are too many to list, but this sample sufficiently illustrates the point that there were numerous theologians contributing to the discussion, on-going development, reception, and refinement of the doctrine. Calvin, therefore, was not normative for the tradition. In fact, Calvin's name appears only once in Leigh's treatment of union with Christ.³³

Calvin as Normative?

Partee might respond that this proves his contention, namely, "The problem, as it seems to me, is that 'later Reformed theologians' imitate each other, not Calvin."³⁴ On the contrary, Leigh's citation patterns reveal several things. First, why would Leigh and other Reformed theologians assume that Calvin was normative for the tradition apart from any type of ecclesiastical sanction? The Lutheran tradition, for example, holds Luther as normative not because the tradition bears his name but because the Lutheran church enshrined some of Luther's writings in the *Book of Concord* (including the Smalcald Articles (1537) and his Small and Large Catechisms (1529)) commended his commentary on Galatians, and regularly invokes his name as an authority.³⁵ No major Reformed confession ever does this with Calvin's name or works.³⁶ One may certainly esteem Calvin as a great theologian and even believe that he is the brightest luminary of the tradition, but one's subjective opinion is different from the objective facts of history. To prove Calvin's greatness or influence, one must provide objective data such as the number of copies of Calvin's works that were sold in the Early Modern period, as well as quotations, allusions, or echoes of Calvin's ideas in the works of other theologians.

If the tradition formally established Calvin as the norm, then Leigh's citations to other writers might indeed prove the devolution of the Reformed tradition—its break with its founder. But on the other hand, has doctrinal development and dialogue ever stood still? Leigh's citations and references point to the fact that the High Orthodox Reformed theologians continued to debate, discuss, and explain the doctrines of the Reformation. As others contributed to the on-going dialogue, subsequent theologians interacted with the growing body of literature. True, Leigh's citations may not always indicate which works represent the cream

³³ Ibid., VII.iii (p. 495).

³⁴ Partee, *Theology of John Calvin*, 14 n46.

³⁵ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 297–328, 345–480, 573.

³⁶ Carl R. Trueman, "Calvin and Calvinism," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed., Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 225.

of the crop, but they do reveal which works were likely most important at the time, at least in Leigh's mind. But the citation patterns in Leigh's work were not an anomaly.

The same pattern appears in one of the seventeenth century's greatest debates over union with Christ, namely, the communion controversy between John Owen (1616–83) and William Sherlock (ca. 1641–1707). In short, Sherlock, a leading figure in the Church of England, had great contempt for non-conformist theologians and churchmen, like Owen. He lobbed a theological grenade against Owen's doctrine of mystical union with Christ and derided it as novel and heretical. If Calvin's doctrine of union with Christ was as great and normative as ParTEE claims, then one might expect that Owen and other non-conformists would appeal to him to vindicate their doctrine from the charges of novelty and heresy. During the controversy between 1674–75 Sherlock and non-conformist theologians spilled an ocean of ink and published some four thousand pages in various books defending their respective positions. To my count, Calvin's name appears four times among a total of twenty-five other theologians from the patristic, medieval, Reformation, and post-Reformation periods. In fact, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), a medieval theologian noted for his doctrine of union with Christ, is cited three times.³⁷ His sermons on the Song of Songs feature as one of many key texts in the debate. Calvin never published anything on this book of Scripture, a book commonly cited in support of the doctrine of union with Christ.³⁸ These citation patterns reveal that Reformed theologians never saw themselves as disciples of any one man but as Reformed catholics, and as such, regularly drew upon a wide body of knowledge from every major period of church history in the construction and articulation of their doctrines of union with Christ.

Conclusion

In summary, we must set aside the claim that Calvin was no Calvinist because Calvinists rejected his doctrine of union with Christ. The claim fails on two counts. First, the Reformed tradition never established Calvin as a norm. Rather, Scripture and confession always served as the norms for the tradition. No one man was ever granted fountainhead status. Second, the surveyed evidence clearly demonstrates that Reformed Orthodox theologians never abandoned the doctrine of union with Christ. Rather, it was an integral part of their soteriology. Scholasticism, exegesis, union with Christ, and the order of salvation all happily coexist in Reformed Orthodox theology. Hence, Calvin is but one bright light in a sky littered with many other great stars.³⁹

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³⁷ For the list and tabulation of sources, see J. V. Fesko, "The Communion Controversy: Owen and Sherlock on 'Union with Christ,'" in *In Christ Alone: Perspectives on Union with Christ*, ed. Stephen Clark and Matthew Evans (Fearn: Mentor, 2016), 138–39.

³⁸ Cf., e.g., John Owen, *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost*, in *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 2 (1850–53; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1997), 125; Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs*, 4 vols. (Trappist, KY: Cistercian, 1971–80); Theodore Beza, *Master Bezaes Sermons Upon the Three First Chapters of the Canticle of Canticles* (Oxford: Joseph Barnes, 1587); the "argument" of the book in the 1560 Geneva Bible (*The Bible and Holy Scriptures Conteyned in the Olde and Newe Testament* [Geneva: Rouland Hali, 1560], 280).

³⁹ Richard A. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 161–243; J. V. Fesko, *Beyond Calvin: Union with Christ and Justification in Early Modern Reformed Theology (1517–1700)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012).

ServantHistory

Reformed Confessions: Zwingli's Sixty-Seven Articles (1523)

by John R. Muether

With this article *Ordained Servant* begins a yearlong survey of ten confessions in the Reformed tradition. In commemorating this five hundredth anniversary year of the launching of the Protestant Reformation, these brief articles focus on the development of the Reformed faith as a *confessional* tradition of which the Orthodox Presbyterian Church is an heir. This tradition displays unity and diversity while growing into the mature expression of the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms. We underscore that this is a small (though representative) sample. There are many confessions that make up this tradition. For a fuller picture of that rich body of work, readers are encouraged to consult three helpful anthologies of primary sources:

Mark A. Noll, *Confessions and Catechisms of the Reformation*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991.

Arthur C. Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966.

James T. Dennison, Jr. *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation*. 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2008–2014.

Shortly after the “birth” of the Reformation with Luther’s posting of the Ninety-Five Theses in Wittenberg, Germany, Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531) became a prominent pulpit presence in Zurich, Switzerland. By 1522 Zwingli was preaching against many Roman Catholic practices—such as the penitential system and the sale of indulgences, the veneration of saints and the worship of Mary, and the requirements of clerical celibacy and monastic asceticism.

When his preaching met with opposition, the town council called for a “Disputation” or a debate on the points of contention. In preparation, Zwingli composed his Sixty-Seven Articles, which asserted the basics of his evangelical teaching: the Bible is the sole authority for the Christian faith; its message was about Christ, the only savior for humanity and the only head of his church. The catholic church consists of all those who are united by faith to that head. That church is the creation of the Word, not the other way around, and it recognizes no priests except those who proclaim God’s Word. The Christian is robbed of freedom by unbiblical traditions such as clerical celibacy, fasting, feast days, pilgrimages, special clothing, cords, signs, and monastic orders; and scripture designates no purgatory and no separate priesthood.

Each of these articles was brief; most were one-sentence propositions. The Sixty-Seven Articles established the practice of expressing doctrinal commitments in succinct form, advancing the Reformation with clear statements. For the precedent Zwingli set, historian Mark Noll observed, “This document can be considered the first Protestant confession.”¹

Zwingli’s arguments before an audience of six hundred prevailed when the town council formally endorsed the principle of *sola Scriptura*. Zwingli’s zeal is captured in his last thesis, which expresses his eagerness to go on to further subjects: “If anyone wishes to discuss with me usury, tithes, unbaptized children, or confirmation, I am ready to provide an answer.” I could go on, he says, in effect; I am only starting. His wish was granted as a second disputation took place ten months later. His views spread through a growing number of preachers who shared his views.

Zwingli’s leadership in Zurich was firmly established, and the Swiss Reformation was off and running.

An Excerpt

13. Where people heed the Word of God, they learn the will of God plainly and clearly, they are drawn to him by his Spirit, and they are converted to him.

14. Therefore, all Christians should exercise the greatest diligence to see only that the gospel of Christ is preached everywhere.

15. For in believing the gospel we are saved, and in believing not we are condemned, for all truth is clearly contained in it.

16. In the gospel we learn that the teachings and traditions of men are of no use for salvation.

The Sequence of Confessions

Sixty-Seven Articles of Ulrich Zwingli (1523)

Tetrapolitan Confession (1530)

First Helvetic Confession (1536)

French Confession of Faith (1559)

Scots Confession (1560)

Belgic Confession of Faith (1561)

Heidelberg Catechism (1563)

Second Helvetic Confession (1566)

Canons of the Synod of Dordt (1619)

Westminster Confession & Catechisms (1643)

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¹ Mark A. Noll, *Confessions and Catechisms of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 38.

ServantHistory

Geerhardus Vos: Reformed Biblical-Theological Beginnings

by Danny E. Olinger

On September 2, 1891, at the start of the fall semester of his third year teaching at the Theological School in Grand Rapids, twenty-nine year-old Geerhardus Vos was named rector. To mark the occasion and to open the new school year, he delivered an address, “The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology.” In many ways the address was Vos’s coming-out party as a Reformed biblical theologian. Up to this point his only published book, *The Mosaic Origin of the Pentateuchal Codes*, had been polemical in nature. His PhD dissertation had focused on the textual criticism of a fifteenth-century Arabic document. His time in the classroom had been dominated by teaching Reformed dogmatics. The address allowed him to explore two contentions that would become hallmarks of his Reformed biblical-theological writings. In his judgment, the Reformed faith had understood correctly not only the religious end to which Scripture presses, but also that this religious end takes place in the framework of the covenant between God and man.

That Vos was thinking about the topic of the covenant and its place in Reformed theology prior to the address could be seen in his review of H. E. Gravemeijer’s *Leesboek over de Gereformeerde geloofsleer* (Reformed Doctrine Reader), which appeared in the inaugural issue of the Benjamin Warfield–edited *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* in 1890. Vos observed that while Gravemeijer believed federal or covenant theology was the pivot of the whole system of Reformed theology, nowhere did Gravemeijer in the 2,395 pages of his book provide a separate treatment of it. Rather, the different elements of covenant theology were scattered throughout the book in various loci and only referred to incidentally. Vos believed that “if once the federal idea be admitted, it can hardly be kept in such a subordinate position.”¹ He then added, “There are sound reasons for asserting that federalism is not that late and accidental accretion to the body of Reformed theology, which at the present day it is often pronounced to be.”²

The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology

In his address, Vos attempted to show how the doctrine of the covenant was not an “accidental accretion” to Reformed theology. In doing so, he believed that he was following

¹ Geerhardus Vos, Review of *Leesboek over de Gereformeerde geloofsleer*, by H.E. Gravemeijer. *Presbyterian and Reformed Review* vol. 1 (1890): 148.

² *Ibid.*

the example of the Westminster Confession of Faith, which in his words, was “the first Reformed confession in which the doctrine of the covenant is not merely brought in from the side, but is placed in the foreground and has been able to penetrate at almost every point.”³

Further, Vos argued that the doctrine of the covenant was a peculiarly Reformed doctrine that distinguished the Reformed theology from other Protestant theologies, even its closest Reformation friend, Lutheranism. Although both the Reformed and Lutheran cast themselves upon Scripture, they had different starting points when approaching the Scripture. Lutheranism began from the standpoint of man and asked, “How can I be saved?” The Reformed began with the standpoint of God and asked, “How is God’s glory advanced?” This led the Reformed to emphasize the doctrine of the covenant and Lutheranism the doctrine of justification. The different starting points and emphases led to different views on what each believed was the condition of the covenant of grace. The Lutherans taught the only condition was faith. The Reformed believed the conditions of the covenant were faith and new obedience, which, according to Vos, was to say “that justification is by faith alone but that the covenant is much broader.”⁴

The Reformed stress upon the covenant and the Lutheran stress upon justification also led each to view the eschatological goal of man differently. Lutheranism believed that the final destination for man was the garden into which Adam had been placed prior to the fall into sin. Consequently, the work of Christ as the second Adam was to restore man to the position that man held before the fall into sin, a position that was mutable. According to Vos, this was why Lutheran theology was consistent when it taught an apostasy of the saints.

The Reformed, however, believed the goal set before man was not a return to man’s mutable situation prior to the fall. The biblical goal was translation to a higher estate, an environment without sin and without the possibility of sin where full fellowship with God would take place.

Vos believed that because Reformed theology took hold of the Scriptures at the deepest root, the preeminence of the glory of God in all that has been created, it was in a better position than Lutheranism to work through the Scriptures. Vos summarized:

All other explanations of the difference between the Lutheran and Reformed traditions in the end again come down to this, that the former begins with man and the latter with God. God doesn’t exist because of man, but man because of God. This is what is written at the entrance of the temple of Reformed theology.⁵

Vos labelled this conviction the “Reformed principle.” He argued that when the Reformed principle was applied to man and his relationship to God, it broke into three parts. First, all of man’s work has to rest on an antecedent work of God. Second, in all of his works man has to show forth God’s image and be a means for the revelation of God’s

³ Geerhardus Vos, “The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 239.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 234, n1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 242.

virtues. And, third, the revelation of God's virtues must proceed by way of understanding and will in a self-conscious manner and actively come to expression in one's life.⁶

In the rest of the address, Vos sought to show that the requirements of the Reformed principle flowed from a proper recognition of the covenant of works, the covenant of redemption, and the covenant of grace.

The Covenant of Works and the Reformed Principle

In postulating that all of man's work has to rest on an antecedent work of God, Vos defended the biblical validity of the covenant of works. An eternal and unchangeable future communing with God was put before man in the garden, and the means of obtaining this end was the covenant of works.

Lutheranism, devoid of a covenant of works in its system of theology, denied that a higher goal existed for man than life in Eden. But, in immediately placing man in the highest estate of bliss at creation, Lutheranism overlooked the requirement that man's life-purpose and motivation must be the glory of God. Even less, Vos stated, did Lutheranism satisfy the requirement that man consciously seek to express the revelation of God's virtues in life.

A proper understanding of the covenant of works allowed the Reformed to avoid these errors. The Reformed believed that the covenant of works posited for mankind something higher as a goal than the indirect and losable communion that took place in the garden between God and man. Vos wrote:

The Reformed view fixes its gaze on something higher. It sees man not as being placed in eternal bliss from the beginning, but as being placed in such a way that he might attain to eternal bliss. There still hovers above him the possibility of sin and death which is given with his mutable freedom. He is free to do the good out of his good nature, but he has not yet attained the highest freedom which can do good only. The latter is placed before him as an ideal. The means of obtaining it is the covenant of works.⁷

Vos believed the lack of appreciation for the covenant of works grew out of an instinctive aversion to the use of language that gave the impression that God would be in the debt of man. Vos explained this was not the case. "Out of the nothingness from which the Almighty called him into being the creature brought along no rights, least of all the right to an un-losable, eternal life."⁸ The Westminster Confession of Faith in a pointedly beautiful way explained that the covenant of works was more than the natural bond between God and man:

The distance between God and the creatures is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 243. Vos also explained here that Christ's work as the second Adam was not restricted to restoring what was lost in the first Adam. Rather, what is inherited in the second Adam is the full realization of what the first Adam would have achieved for his posterity if he had remained unfallen and confirmed in his state.

⁸ Ibid., 244.

fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.⁹

After man's fall into sin, the covenant of works was not set aside, but was incorporated into something higher, the covenant of grace. This is why the command "do this" is still valid, even if the command is not followed by "you shall live." Thus, the participants in the covenant of grace "are exempt from the demand of the law as the condition for eternal blessedness, but not from its demand as being normative for their moral life."¹⁰ In his self-conscious, covenantal seeking after God and his virtues, man displays God's image and meets the second and third requirements of the Reformed principle.

The Covenant of Redemption and the Reformed Principle

Vos maintained that if there was a covenant of works, there must furthermore be a covenant of redemption, also known as a counsel of peace. The work of redemption, which proceeded from God's sovereign and eternal will, was executed in a covenantal way through Christ the Mediator. Christ's work as Mediator was essential because "after the fall man will never again be able to work in a manner pleasing to God except a completed work of God be performed on his behalf. Earning eternal life has forever been taken out of his hands."¹¹ Vos noted on this point "the entire Reformation, both Lutheran and Calvinist, took exception to Rome, which failed to appreciate this fundamental truth."¹²

But, despite all the purity in which the doctrine of justification by faith alone was given back to the church anew, Lutheranism did not comprehend that a higher point remained, namely, that the heart of Abraham's faith was in Abraham glorifying God (Rom. 4:20). But, what Lutheranism did not pick up upon, the Reformed did, argued Vos.

When the Reformed takes the obtaining of salvation completely out of man's hands, he does this so that the glory which God gets from it might be uncurtailed. What is important for him is the realization that God glorifies Himself in the salvation of sinners.¹³

There was no gift that the believer enjoyed that Christ did not earn. Neither was there any gift to the believer from Christ that did not elevate God's glory. When the believer grasps this by faith, the magnificent idea of grace begins to dominate his life. Vos finished, "In this way Reformed theology simply showed that here too it would be content with nothing but its one all-embracing slogan: the work of grace in the sinner as a mirror for the glory of God."¹⁴

The Covenant of Grace and the Reformed Principle

⁹ WCF 7.1.

¹⁰ Vos, "Doctrine of the Covenant," 244.

¹¹ Ibid., 246.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 247.

¹⁴ Ibid., 248.

Vos believed that if the work of salvation had a covenantal form at its roots, which it did, then the unfolding of that work in history was bound to proceed in a covenantal way. Christ, the anointed Mediator in the covenant of redemption, rules in the house of grace and gathers to himself his church through his Word and Spirit. Christ became guarantor precisely so that believers “might be presented as parties in the covenant and behave as such, so that there will be no imputation to them of His merits without re-creation in God’s image and glorification of God’s grace in the mirror of their mind and in the activity of their life.”¹⁵

Vos then enumerated four sub points under the Covenant of Grace.

1. On account of God’s accomplished work, the covenant of grace unfolds as the essence of the riches of the *ordo salutis*. “In response to the question how the salvation obtained by the Mediator is appropriated by the individual, the Reformed believer answers: In such a way that it best reveals the greatness and the glory of the triune God in the work of salvation.”¹⁶

The believer who knows that he owes all to God for his salvation is able to take in the glory of God and allow it to shine through him. This is possible with the Reformed position because it distinguished between the broader and narrower sense of the image of God in man. Even after the fall, man in the image of God can know God—although Vos quickly added after this exposition, “The purpose here is not to ascribe any good to fallen man.”¹⁷

After the covenant of works was broken, God kept its memory alive holding up the ideal of eternal life to be obtained by keeping the law, even though it was a lost ideal. This is why the older Reformed theologians did not always clearly distinguish between the covenant of works and the Sinaitic covenant. “At Sinai it was not the ‘bare’ law that was given, but a reflection of the covenant of works revived, as it were, in the interests of the covenant of grace continued at Sinai.”¹⁸

2. The essence of the covenant, by which it becomes a power in the life of the believer, is a fresh, living fellowship in which the power of grace is operative. By faith, the Christian knows “he is a member of the covenant, and that faith has a wide outlook, a comprehensive character, which not only points to justification but also to all the benefits which are his in Christ.”¹⁹

This again led Vos to contrast Reformed and Lutheran theology. In Lutheranism, the Holy Spirit first generates faith in the sinner, then justification follows faith, and only then does mystical union with Christ take place. The Reformed outlook is the reverse.

One is first united to Christ, the Mediator of the covenant, by a mystical union, which finds its conscious recognition in faith. By this union with Christ all that is in Christ is

¹⁵ Ibid., 253.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 254. Vos believed that this helped to explain why the use of the law differed in Reformed and Lutheran practice. Theoretically, both the Reformed and Lutheran agreed to the threefold use of the law, *usus politicus*, *usus elenchticus*, *usus normativus*, but Lutherans scarcely allowed a place for the law (as the Reformed did) before the fall into sin. Consequently, Lutherans related the third use of the law to the remnants of the old nature of the believer; the Reformed related it to the new man. That is to say that the Reformed also viewed the law as a positive rule of life, which is why “in the Reformed churches the law is read every Sunday, a usage with which Lutherans apparently are not familiar.” Ibid., 255 n9.

¹⁸ Ibid., 255.

¹⁹ Ibid., 256.

simultaneously given. Faith embraces all this too; it not only grasps the instantaneous justification, but lays hold of Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King, as his rich and full Messiah.²⁰

The difference between the Lutheran embracing of Christ for justification and the Reformed embracing of Christ for justification and sanctification was the difference between the life of a child and that of an adult. “The Lutheran lives as a child who enjoys his father’s smile for the moment; the Reformed believer lives as a man, in whose consciousness the eternal glory of God throws its radiance.”²¹

3. The covenant of grace, as far as adult members are concerned, presupposes acceptance and personal appropriation of its contents on the basis of the election grace of God. This does not mean that the covenant administration proceeds from election nor that all non-elect stand outside any administration of the covenant. The essence of the covenant, fellowship with the living God, is found only in the true children of God and is therefore no more extensive than election.

There is also a covenantal obligation in the state of grace. Lutherans were ever fearful that the Reformed had come near to Rome with the belief that new life obtained by Christ must be brought to action and development in the life of the believer. This fear was unfounded, for it was Christ working in his members which produced the fruits of gratitude. Christ, the anointed King, cannot be quiet and inactive in those who belong to him. This reality explains the church’s missionary zeal. Christianity is a restless, recreating principle that never seeks to withdraw from the world, but strives for its own completion.

4. With respect to children there is the expectation that covenant children will enter into the fellowship of the covenant. “This expectation is based on the promise of God to believers that he desires to be their God and the God of their seed and that He also desires to continue His covenant in their seed and to make it a living reality.”²²

Precursor to Reformed Biblical Theology

Twenty-five years after Vos delivered “Doctrine of the Covenant,” he returned to a consideration of the place of the doctrine of the covenant within the Reformed faith at the conclusion of his article, “Hebrews, The Epistle of the Diatheke.”²³ There Vos made clear what he inferred with his argumentation in “Doctrine of the Covenant”; he considered the Reformed doctrine of the covenant the precursor to the discipline of Reformed biblical theology.

In building to that conclusion, Vos said that in both the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Reformed faith the covenant-idea communicated the highest possibilities of religion. This did not mean that Hebrews and Reformed theology shared the same label on the bottle, but both shared the same wine. The covenant theology, or philosophy of history, that shaped

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 257.

²² Ibid., 262.

²³ Geerhardus Vos, “Hebrews, The Epistle of the Diatheke,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980). Gaffin’s astute placement of “Hebrews, the Epistle of the Diatheke” immediately prior to “Doctrine of the Covenant” reflected the close relationship between the two articles.

Hebrews was faithfully incorporated in Reformed theology. He then listed four places in which this connection was evident.

1. Reformed theology recognizes the sovereignty of God in the whole process of religion and redemption, which is found in the comprehensive system of the covenant. Here Vos openly borrowed from what he wrote in “Doctrine of the Covenant” regarding the “Reformed principle.” He said, “A deep impression of the divine majesty colors all intercourse with Him. For in Him are all things and through Him are all things. The creature exists for His sake.”²⁴ This consciousness of accountability to the sovereign God has always characterized the Reformed faith, even to the point that it has been charged with legalism. But, legalism, which lacks the supreme sense of worship (“it obeys but it does not adore”) is far removed from the Reformed faith with its sounding of adoration for God in belief and life.

2. Reformed theology stresses the spiritual intimacy of covenant fellowship between God and believers. The wonder of salvation is that the God who dwells in the high and holy place comes near to the humble heart and the contrite spirit.

For this reason the ultimate root of every believer’s relation to God lies in the most intimate and individual act of election, an act wherein the love of God consciously chooses and sets up over against itself a human spirit to be bound to God in the bonds of everlasting friendship.²⁵

3. Reformed theology ascribes to the Christian life a unique degree of devotion to the glory of God. Again, Vos reworked what he argued previously about the “Reformed principle” in “Doctrine of the Covenant.” He said:

The believer does not merely desire to have intercourse with God, but specifically to make this intercourse subservient to glorifying God. Hence on the one hand the high place which the direct worship of God holds in the exercise of the religious function, on the other hand the consistent effort to organize the whole of life on the principle of a comprehensive service of God, the religious impulse imparting to every human activity and achievement that spirit by which they are made to rebound to the honoring of God’s name.²⁶

4. Reformed theology upholds the absolute truthfulness of Scripture. In this regard, the Reformed faith was the least pragmatic of all forms of Christian teaching, even though “it has from the beginning shown itself possessed of a true historic sense in the apprehension of the progressive character of the deliverance of truth.”²⁷ Vos concluded, “Its doctrine of the covenants on its historical side represents the first attempt at constructing a history of revelation and may justly be considered the precursor of what is at present called biblical theology.”²⁸

²⁴ Ibid., 231.

²⁵ Ibid., 232.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid. Vos also made the connection between the covenant and biblical theology in his July 3, 1893, letter to Herman Bavinck, which will be considered in the next chapter under the heading of Vos’s teaching of Reformed biblical theology at Princeton.

Election, Covenant, and Baptism

While “Doctrine of the Covenant” allowed Vos to explore what would become core beliefs of his Reformed biblical theology, there could be little doubt that the concluding remarks in the address on the relationship of election and the covenant were an answer to his main critic, L. J. Hulst, editor of *De Wachter*. Starting in February of that year, Hulst had attacked Vos in print for not endorsing infralapsarianism, which Hulst believed was the position of the Canons of Dordt. Apparently Vos’s comments struck a nerve in Hulst. On the day after the address, Hulst submitted an official protest about Vos to the Curatorium of the Theological School. In the protest, he argued that Vos had strayed from the confessional standards of the Christian Reformed Church in teaching supralapsarianism to the students.²⁹

Canadian Reformed theologian Jelle Faber in his book *American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism* detailed the dispute from Hulst’s perspective. According to Faber, Hulst could not reconcile God’s election and God’s covenant of redemption as eternal decrees with the execution of God’s covenant as a relation established in time. Hulst concluded that understanding the connection between election and covenant belonged to the secret things of the Lord. He stated, “When I saw this clearly, I abandoned that speculative idea of a covenant of grace from eternity and I descended to the covenant that God has established with Abraham and his descendants, Genesis 17. This is the covenant to which the entire Bible refers.”³⁰

When Vos stressed the centrality of the covenant of redemption in the plan of salvation, Hulst believed that he was advocating a speculative position that could not be supported from Scripture. But, just as objectionable was when Vos spoke of two sides of the covenant, one forensic and the other relational. The forensic or judicial agreement was seen as being *under* the covenant, and the relational or fellowship of life was seen as being *in* the covenant. Faber wrote of Vos’s division, “The purpose of the forensic agreement is the transition into the fellowship of life. Being under the covenant is meant to lead to life in the covenant. Where the fellowship of life is absent, there the essence of the covenant is absent.”³¹

Faber, supporting Hulst, believed this distinction denied the teaching of the Canons of Dordt regarding the baptism and salvation of the infants of believers. He said, “When Geerhardus Vos thus restricts the being in the covenant to the elect only, he does not do full justice to the confessional expressions of Lord’s Day 27 and of the Canons of Dordt I, 17.”³²

Whereas Faber sided with Hulst, Charles Dennison sided with Vos. Dennison argued that Vos’s distinction was helpful in answering what had become a perennial question in the Christian Reformed Church of the late nineteenth century, the relationship between membership in the covenant and divine election. On the one hand, membership in the

²⁹ See, James T. Dennison Jr., “The Life of Geerhardus Vos,” in James T. Dennison Jr., ed., *The Letters of Geerhardus Vos* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2005), 29.

³⁰ Jelle Faber, *American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism* (Pella, Iowa: Inheritance), 30.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

³² *Ibid.* “Article 17: The Salvation of the Infants of Believers,” reads, “Since we must make judgments about God’s will from his Word, which testifies that the children of believers are holy, not by nature but by virtue of the gracious covenant in which they together with their parents are included, godly parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in infancy.”

covenant of grace was limited to the elect since only the elect can enjoy true communion with God. On the other hand, membership in the covenant of grace included more than the elect as many members of the covenant never arrive at true communion with God. Could these two positions be reconciled? Dennison wrote:

To resolve this difficulty Vos says we must speak on biblical grounds of the covenant as a “legal relationship.” Here the emphasis is upon what ought to be. But we must also speak of covenant as “living fellowship” and not of what ought to be, but of what actually is. Only those who truly believe are in the covenant in the latter sense. However, all born into the covenant of believing parents are under the covenant and can be said to be in the covenant.³³

Dennison explained that Vos’s distinction between the legal and the essential threw light upon two different questions that were being asked. If asked, when looking at the legal relationship aspect of the covenant, “of whom can it be expected that they live the covenant life?”, the answer is believers (all who have professed the faith) and their children. If asked, when looking at the essential side of the covenant, “in whom has this legal relationship become a living fellowship?”, the answer is the regenerate, those who have faith and are living for God. Dennison concluded, “The covenant relationship into which a child of believers is born is the image and likeness of the covenant fellowship in which he is later expected to live.”³⁴

Princeton Seminary’s Pursuit

The more that Hulst accused Vos of doctrinal error, the more Vos began to consider teaching at another school.³⁵ Vos expressed his frustration over the situation to Herman Bavinck. He said, “Those who have thrown this matter of discord in our small church are as absolutistic as possible. There is only one Reformed opinion and that is theirs. They push the matter through and seem to have in mind that our church will put an end to the issue.”³⁶ Vos added:

In this matter, my position is not pleasant. I am not a fanatic, and will gladly concede as much as I can, but here I surely cannot. As I wrote you, I cannot agree with Dr. Kuyper in everything. But it seems to me that he is criticized for the good Reformed views in his presentation.³⁷

Vos then revealed that he was more and more coming to the conclusion that he could not stay on teaching in Grand Rapids. “More than once I have been approached concerning

³³ Charles G. Dennison, “The Life of Vos,” unpublished manuscript in the Archives of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Henry Beets expressed the general consensus regarding Vos’s departure from the Theological School when he wrote, “Apparently Dr. Vos’s decision to leave our School was taken under the influence of Hulst’s opposition.” See, Henry Beets, “Rev. L. J. Hulst, A Man of Note,” in *The Banner* no. 57 (August 31, 1922): 533.

³⁶ Geerhardus Vos to Herman Bavinck, June 30, 1891, in Dennison, *Letters*, 158.

³⁷ Ibid., 159.

how I feel about accepting a chair in a seminary of the Presbyterian Church. Lately I like the idea more than before.” Vos quickly added that he would rather labor at Kampen, but that two things pleaded against that option, his parents living in America and the charm of American life.³⁸

The seminary of the Presbyterian Church that was pursuing Vos as a teacher was Princeton Seminary. Vos’s old mentor, William Henry Green, served as the school’s main recruiter of Vos’s services. Green was eager to have Vos join the orthodox fight against liberal theology as represented by Charles A. Briggs of Union Seminary in New York. On February 23, 1892, Princeton issued a formal call to Vos inviting him to accept its new chair in biblical theology.³⁹ Green followed up the invite with three consecutive letters to Vos on March 17, 18, and 19, 1892, which urged Vos to accept the offer and come to Princeton.

In Green’s opinion Vos’s laboring in Grand Rapids was not the greatest use of the talents that God had given him. He told Vos that it was the equivalent of a talented engineer at work on a small job in the interior when his skill was needed on the coast to save the whole country from flooding from a break in the dykes. Those living in the flooded area besiege the engineer, begging him to come because there is no one to stop the river from devastating the entire region. But the man continues to decline. Green then asked, “Does he do right? Is a man at liberty to decline a public duty in a time of general peril, however willing he may be to remain in obscurity and whatever local value may attach to his less conspicuous labour?”⁴⁰ He then addressed Vos directly.

My dear Dr. Vos, this may be the turning point of your whole life, on which your entire future may hinge, and the service you can render to the cause of Christ. Remember that the master, under whose orders you serve, rules the whole field of battle, and not one corner of it merely. Is he not calling you to a point where you can do his work more effectively, and where there is a more pressing need than where you are now?⁴¹

In his last letter to Vos, Green elaborated on the situation at Princeton and the important part it played in the conflict that was developing over the theological soul of the Presbyterian Church. He explained that four vacant professorships needed to be filled at the seminary, and not just anyone would do. The Presbyterian Church was engaged in a theological battle due to the rising tide of rationalism in the church. If Princeton brought in incompetent men, the consequences for sound conservative theology would be disastrous. Pleadingly, Green wrote:

If it were not for the present theological crisis and the position which Princeton holds before the church, the case would be very different. If it was the mere question of the temporary prosperity or abasement of the Seminary—and other seminaries more prosperous would do Princeton’s work, the case would be different. But as matters stand, if Princeton goes down, the cause of orthodox theology and evangelical religion will receive a heavy blow. This is the reason that such grave issues hang upon your

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ *New York Times*, February 24, 1892, p. 8.

⁴⁰ Letter, William H. Green to Geerhardus Vos, March 18, 1892, in Dennison, *Letters*, 30.

⁴¹ Ibid.

decision and that we cannot regard the possibility of your adhering to your declination with any equanimity.⁴²

Green urged Vos to come to Princeton in person and to allow the faculty verbally to express the importance of his accepting. In his closing sentence, he again returned to the central contention of the letter, “You will inflict, I fear an incalculable and irreparable injury on the cause which is dear to your heart, if you insist on declining.”⁴³

Unbeknownst to Green as he was writing Vos, the Curatorium at the Theological School had called an emergency meeting the week before on March 11. Having been informed of the Princeton call, they made clear to Vos that they would do all within their power to retain him. Vos’s father, Jan, a member of the Curatorium, wanted his son to stay for more than the theological education of the students. Jan Vos also wanted his family to stay together in Grand Rapids.⁴⁴

In his March 18 letter to Warfield, Vos indicated that he had been living in suspense after receiving Princeton’s offer, but lamented that he had to turn it down. Although his personal desire was to be at Princeton, Vos did not believe that the situation allowed him any other decision. In his opinion, the students at the Theological School were starting to show some promise. If he were to leave, that advancement might soon disappear, and the blow to the seminary might prove fatal. Vos also considered it important to preserve among the Dutch the old Calvinist faith. He wrote:

Though shrinking from the many unpleasant features of this work, I do not feel at liberty before God to abandon it. Before I received the call, I was also fully aware of this, but it is sometimes necessary to be placed before a definite choice in order to see one’s duty clearly pointed out. Though feeling sad, I know that I could not act otherwise.⁴⁵

Vos hoped that his decision had not disappointed Warfield to the extent that he might lose his brotherly love and counsel, which had become a comfort to him. He closed positively, “I do believe, if we are found faithful, that better days are still in store for the Calvinism, which you and we love, and which, each in our own sphere, we try to uphold and restore.”⁴⁶ Given how much Vos internally debated the offer, and in all probability relying on the counsel of Green and Warfield, Princeton wisely kept the call open ended even after Vos declined.

Around the same time that Vos was turning down Princeton, Bavinck inquired if Vos might entertain the possibility of joining him on the faculty at the Theological School in Kampen. Even though Vos was not inclined to go to Kampen, his friendship with Bavinck was evident when Bavinck visited America that summer. Bavinck stayed three weeks with Vos and his family in Grand Rapids. When Christian Reformed members celebrated

⁴² Letter, William H. Green to Geerhardus Vos, March 19, 1892, in Dennison, *Letters*, 31.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴⁴ Statement of Vos’s daughter, Marianne Radius, to James T. Dennison Jr. on July 30, 1994. See, Dennison, *Letters*, 32.

⁴⁵ Letter, “Geerhardus Vos to Benjamin Warfield,” March 18, 1892, in Dennison, *Letters*, 170.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

Bavinck's presence with a banquet for him at the Macatawa resort hotel located on Lake Michigan, Vos wrote a poem in honor of his friend.⁴⁷

While the visiting Bavinck might have been honored with the banquet, Vos was at the height of his popularity at that time. When Vos's decision to remain at the Theological School was announced, the student body rejoiced with pride that Vos was still their teacher, even presenting him a gold watch for staying.⁴⁸ The words of Henry Beets reflected the prevailing attitude in Grand Rapids about Vos.

We have a splendid professor in Dr. Vos. He is a Calvinist of the most pronounced type and a supralapsarian at that . . . He is a young man of thirty and as kind and obliging and humble as I never saw a man before. And what a treasure of knowledge he may call his own! I suppose you know that he is a close friend of your old professor Dr. Steffens and also to the Drs. Bavinck, Kuyper, Warfield.⁴⁹

Vos was also extremely popular as a preacher in Grand Rapids at that time. Jacob Vanden Bosch observed:

Whenever (Vos) preached, he addressed audiences that filled every seat. He did not carry his hearers away with his eloquence, nor did he present truth so simply that the people always understood him. But he was Dr. Vos: that was enough. He was indeed a unique figure among us. Perhaps never again did like response greet him.⁵⁰

In the Report of the Superintendent of Public Education in the State of Michigan regarding the Theological School for the 1892 school year, Vos was singled out for praise. The report read, "Dr. Vos, one of the professors, is of national celebrity⁵¹ and has recently declined a professorship at Princeton, N.J., Theological Seminary, preferring to labor in the interest of his own seminary at Grand Rapids."⁵²

Jan Vos and Abraham Kuyper

⁴⁷ George Harinck, "The Poetry of Theologian Geerhardus Vos," in *Dutch-American Arts and Letters in Historical Perspective*, ed. Robert P. Swierenga, Jacob E. Nyenhuis, Nella Kennedy (Holland, MI: Van Raalte, 2008), 75.

⁴⁸ Dennison, "Life of Vos," in *Letters*, 32.

⁴⁹ Letter, Henry Beets to Dirk Scholten, February 6, 1893, in George Harinck, "Geerhardus Vos as an Introducer of Kuyper in America," in *The Dutch-American Experience: Essays in Honor of Robert P. Swierenga*, ed. Hans Krabbendam and Larry J. Wagenaar (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 2000), 260.

⁵⁰ Jacob G. Vanden Bosch, "Geerhardus Vos," *Reformed Journal*, November 1954: 12.

⁵¹ The reference to Vos being a "national celebrity" was probably connected to more than just Vos's declining the offer to Princeton Seminary. It is safe to assume that Vos had already been informed that Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania, determined to award him an honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity in light of his outstanding service in the field of theological studies. Vos received the honorary degree in 1893 from Lafayette, which was second only to Princeton University at the time in sending its graduates to attend Princeton Seminary.

⁵² "Theological School of the Holland Christian Reformed Church," in Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction by the Michigan Department of Public Instruction, page 47. *Fifty-Seventh Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction of the State of Michigan with Accompanying Documents for the Year 1893* (Lansing, MI: Robert Smith, 1894).

At the same time that Vos was considering where his future rested, he continued in his efforts to introduce Kuyper to the English-speaking Reformed world. In a review of Kuyper's *De verflauwing der grenzen* (The Fading of the Boundaries), Vos agreed with Kuyper's contention that Christianity is in itself a protest against all naturalism and evolution. Pantheism attempts to silence this protest by removing the supernatural element from Christianity, but Christ is the miracle with his birth at Bethlehem.

Kuyper rejected an apologetic method to combat this naturalistic influence because not even the most eloquent pleading could save Christians in a court where reason is party and judge at the same time. God prescribes the true method of resistance in his Word, the separation that exists between believers and the world. Both explaining and defending Kuyper's position, Vos wrote, "We should not spend our force in fruitless skirmishing; but retreat behind our defenses, and create for ourselves a new sphere of life, in which all lines drawn by God are respected."⁵³ Vos emphasized with Kuyper that such a stance did not mean there were spheres of life from which Christians should withdraw.

While Vos's Kuyper review was appearing in the *Presbyterian and Reformed Review*, Vos's parents and sister were headed over to the Netherlands to attend the Synod of Dordrecht, where Kuyper's influence loomed large.⁵⁴ The previous summer at the Synod of Amsterdam, Kuyper's six-year old Doleantie and the fifty-eight year old Afscheiding united and adopted the name The Reformed Churches of the Netherlands (De Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland). At the conclusion of the Amsterdam synod, Kuyper was appointed to serve as a deputy to invite other Reformed churches to send delegates to the next year's synod at Dordrecht in order to acquaint them with the union that had taken place. When the Christian Reformed Church Synod in North America received the invitation, they voted to send Jan Vos as their representative.

At the Synod itself, the Reformed Church in America representatives, Nicholas Steffens, then professor at Hope College, and Rense Joldersma, spoke first. Their comments were warmly received. Jan Vos followed, and his remarks on behalf of the Christian Reformed Church in North America created a controversy. In his speech, he praised God that the union had taken place according to the Word of God. He also let the body know that prayer was being offered daily for The Reformed Churches of the Netherlands at the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North American which was meeting at the same time in Grand Rapids. What drew the mixed reaction were his comments concerning the Masonic Lodge issue in America.⁵⁵ The Christian Reformed Church had taken a stand against Lodge membership, banning it in 1867. The Reformed Church in America was more lenient and allowed Lodge membership. Jan Vos believed The Reformed Churches in the Netherlands should support the Christian Reformed Church in its stand against Lodge

⁵³ Geerhardus Vos, Review of *De verflauwing der grenzen*, by Abraham Kuyper, *Presbyterian and Reformed Review*, vol. 4 (1893): 432.

⁵⁴ In his July 3, 1893, letter to Herman Bavinck, Vos wrote, "For sometime now my brother and I have been keeping house alone. My parents and sister are en route to the Netherlands. Father is a delegate of the church here to your Synod." See, Dennison, *Letters*, 174–75.

⁵⁵ For a history of the controversy, see, Elton J. Bruins, "The Masonic Controversy in Holland, Michigan, 1879–1892," in *Perspectives on the Christian Reformed Church*, ed. Peter De Klerk and Richard R. De Ridder (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 53–71.

membership. Kuyper, who generally sought a mediating position on the Lodge issue, thought the remarks of Jan Vos were irresponsible.⁵⁶

Change of Mind

Geerhardus Vos's decision to stay in Grand Rapids did not remove the tension that existed between him and L. J. Hulst. At the June 15, 1892, meeting of the Curatorium, Vos suggested that perhaps it would be better for a different professor to teach dogmatics at the Theological School. The Curatorium responded with a unanimous vote to have Vos remain as the teacher in dogmatics. Shortly after receiving notice of the Curatorium's vote to have him remain, Vos renounced his loyalty to the King of the Netherlands and became a citizen of the United States on July 5, 1892.⁵⁷

Whether it was the result of Green's pleading, the worsening of the situation at Grand Rapids, or some other consideration, by the next Spring Vos had changed his mind about accepting the Princeton offer. When the Curatorium heard about Vos's reversal and willingness to accept the Princeton offer, it met in special session on April 11, 1893. Despite the Curatorium's promise at that meeting to remove anything that might cause Vos a problem at the school, a strong possibility existed that the decision to leave Grand Rapids was more than theological. Nicholas Steffens had previously written to Abraham Kuyper in regard to Vos's teaching at the Free University of Amsterdam, "I would like to send you Dr. Vos, if I had the power to do so. But as long as his parents live and he is unmarried. I don't think he will leave . . ."⁵⁸

What changed was that Vos met Catherine Smith and wanted to marry her. Although a pious young lady and devout Christian, she had two strikes against her living in Grand Rapids. The first strike was that she was a Methodist from Lima, Ohio. The second strike was that she was not Dutch. Vos had not met her at one of the Reformed churches in Grand Rapids. Rather, they became acquainted at the local library where she served as the librarian. Going to Princeton would allow Vos to marry the non-Dutch speaking Catherine and to raise a family outside the provincialism of Grand Rapids. Vos informed Princeton prior to its graduation day on May 10 that he would accept the call.⁵⁹

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⁵⁶ See, Charles G. Dennison, "Geerhardus Vos and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church," in *History for a Pilgrim People*, ed. Danny E. Olinger and David K. Thompson (Willow Grove, PA: Committee for the Historian of the OPC, 2002), 79.

⁵⁷ Dennison, *Letters*, 32.

⁵⁸ Letter, Nicholas Steffens to Abraham Kuyper, April 25, 1891, in Harinck, "Vos as Introducer of Kuyper," 260.

⁵⁹ Princeton Seminary Graduation notice, May 9, 1893.

ServantHistory

Presbyterians and the American Mainstream

by Darryl G. Hart

Mainline Presbyterianism is making a comeback. Michelle Alexander, a civil rights attorney who dented national discussions of race with her book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*,¹ recently decided to leave Ohio State University Law School to teach and study at Union Seminary in New York City. She admitted that her choice to work at arguably the most liberal of mainline Presbyterian seminaries was an odd one since Alexander was not reared a Presbyterian or in any church. But she has also become convinced that the difficulties surrounding race relations in the United States will not find a measure of resolution in better law or policy. Instead, Americans need to pay attention to the “profound moral, ethical, and spiritual dimensions of justice work.”² That explanation works at one level, but can anyone imagine Alexander leaving Ohio State for Fuller Seminary, Gordon-Conwell, or even Westminster Theological Seminary? Chances are that these institutions were not on her radar, thanks to Union’s location in New York City, but also to the much closer proximity of Union to the people, institutions, and finances that go into the leading secular law schools. In other words, for all of Union’s challenges of late—with enrollment, finances, building maintenance, and institutional identity—it is still much more likely to attract public intellectuals than an evangelical or confessional academic institution is.

In the “world” of US Presbyterianism, the PCUSA is still the largest and the most American. Of the largest denominations—with the PCUSA topping the list at roughly 1.6 million, the PCA at almost 400,000, the EPC at 170,000, and then the also rans—the Associate Reformed at 40,000, the Orthodox Presbyterians at an ever constant 31,000, and the Covenanters (RPCNA) at 6,000—denominational identity seems to be closely calibrated to a communion’s social location. Whether size is a product of proximity to the mainstream is another question. But even in the little and opinionated OPC, communicants and pastors have a sense that Orthodox Presbyterianism is closer to the American mainstream than either the Associate Reformed (which is slightly larger) or the Covenanters. Here, as much as Orthodox Presbyterians might hate to admit it, their denomination’s roots in the PCUSA account for whatever sense of cultural superiority the OPC can muster with a straight face. The ARPs and the Covenanters were and still

¹ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, (New York: The New Press, 2010).

² Paul Caron, “Michelle Alexander Resigns From Ohio State Law Faculty For Seminary, Valuing ‘Publicly Accessible Writing Over Academic Careerism’; Law Without ‘A Moral Or Spiritual Awakening’ Cannot Bring About Justice,” *TaxProf Blog*, September 25, 2016, http://taxprof.typepad.com/taxprof_blog/2016/09/michelle-alexander-resigns-from-ohio-state-law-faculty-for-seminary-valuing-publicly-accessible-writ.html, accessed November 28, 2016.

remain predominantly ethnic communions where loyalties to defining moments in Scottish church history loom much larger in denominational identity than mainstream Presbyterianism's participation in the narrative of US history. Both the Seceders and the Covenanters had theological and political reasons for cultural isolation in the United States that never occurred to Orthodox Presbyterians for whom the general expectations of the mainline churches about the place of Protestantism in national life have only been questioned at certain flashpoints in the denomination's history. One of my favorites was the OPC general assembly's 1956 report on the Boy Scouts. Here an institution about as American, religious, and wholesome as they come, failed to measure up to the OPC standards. The Boy Scout's god was too generic and moralistic for the God revealed in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms.

The desire to be mainstream may be hard to shake for Presbyterians who trace their origins to the PCUSA or think of the United States as a Christian nation, but David Hollinger's recent and much invoked argument that mainline Protestants did not lose but actually prevailed over evangelical Protestants in the culture wars should come with warnings.³ In a rebuke to the historical literature of the last three decades that has featured evangelical Protestantism and the Religious Right as the dominant if not mainstream of white American Christianity, Hollinger observes that the United States has actually become what liberal Protestants in the mainline churches wanted—secular, inclusive, and cosmopolitan. Rather than viewing the decline of mainline Protestantism simply from the perspective of “Christian survivalism”—whether the mainline survives among members and institutions—Hollinger proposes that a better perspective is to regard mainstream Protestantism as a “halfway house” to secularism. “The diversity-preoccupied aspects of public American life today,” he asserts, “look much more like what the editors of *The Christian Century* in 1960 hoped it would look like than what the editors of *Christianity Today* were projecting as an ideal future.”⁴ He explains that individualism, freedom, pluralism, tolerance, democracy, and intellectual inquiry were all goals of Protestant ecumenists, and those ideals' triumph in the wider culture depended partly on the churches' advocacy. Much of what the churches advocated has taken root in the United States, and so observers and scholars have been slow to give proper credit to mainstream Protestantism. Hollinger points to the YMCA's removal of Christian from its name and going simply by “the Y” as evidence of the mainline's “cultural victory.”

[H]ere an organization that began in the nineteenth century as fervently evangelical and then in the twentieth century became increasing ecumenical and egalitarian has, in the twenty-first century, proclaimed itself to be virtually secular and in the name of diversity.⁵

The problem with this interpretation—aside from giving Protestants more reason to take credit for creating the United States (a progressive version of America founded as a Christian nation as it were)—is its whiggish understanding of the modern era. Whether Hollinger intends or not, his point suggests that the *telos* of Protestantism was modern

³ David A. Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

multi-cultural America. Why Hollinger does not examine Americanism and Protestantism as distinct identities with the churches becoming increasingly liberal as they became more American is not clear. If Hollinger's point is that Protestantism was the chief carrier of American norms until the arrival of full-blown multi-cultural America, he would be employing a form of Protestant exceptionalism that rivals the old Religious Right's claim that the United States began as a Christian nation. It is as if the Protestant Reformation was chiefly an on-ramp to the highway of liberal society with the United States as the fulfillment of Zwingli's Zurich and Calvin's Geneva.

Another way of assessing mainstream Presbyterianism is not to use American political norms as the standard but the teachings of European churches that implemented ecclesiastical reform. In other words, what if American Presbyterianism was not the gleam in the eye of Martin Bucer, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin back when they were persuading Swiss city councils to embrace and defend the true religion? Did they imagine that removing papal authority and the Mass from the Western Church was simply a warm up for creating a society in which the churches would underwrite a nation with resources to end two world wars and defeat Soviet Communism and that made a creed of individualism, freedom, pluralism, tolerance, democracy, and intellectual inquiry? Another way of asking this is to wonder why rejecting the confessional state and established churches of early modern Europe for the modern liberal order that separated church and state was insufficient for Presbyterians to become American. Why could American Presbyterians not retain beliefs about limited atonement or the eternal decrees while also affirming a federal government that was silent about God and severed ties between church and state?

When the PCUSA began with its First General Assembly this was precisely what happened—namely, revising the church's creed in a way that made sense of the American experience. The heart of the 1787 revision was to alter the twenty-third chapter on the civil magistrate. In paragraph three of the original, the divines asserted that the civil magistrate has

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 entire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses of worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed.

In addition, the magistrate's authorities included calling synods, being present at them, and insuring that "whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God." In 1640s England with a state church still the rule and Christendom the assumption, granting Parliament such broad power made sense.

But ecclesiastical establishment did not make sense in the British colonies soon to be the United States of America. Consequently, the American divines changed the twenty-third chapter so that the magistrate became merely a "nursing father" whose duty was

to protect the church of our common Lord, without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest in such a manner, that all ecclesiastical

persons whatever shall enjoy the full, free, and unquestioned liberty of discharging, every part of their sacred functions, without violence or danger.

In addition to encouraging all the churches, the magistrate should not “interfere with, let, or hinder, the due exercise” of any Christian denomination. The American revisions added that the magistrate should protect “the person and good name of all their people” such that no one, “upon pretense of religion or of infidelity,” should endure any “indignity, violence, abuse, or injury.” From this change to the twenty-third chapter followed relatively minor ones in chapters twenty and thirty-one which had also granted the magistrate power within the internal affairs of the church. This was Presbyterian-styled Americanism.

In contrast, Americanism was a problem for Roman Catholics, and in 1899 Leo XIII condemned it mildly as a heresy mainly because Roman Catholicism was a package. With popes standing supreme not only over all bishops but also over all princes, republics, and city councils—in theory, to argue as Americanist bishops did that the church should adapt to US forms of government, democracy, individual freedom, and the separation of church and state was to break with a social theory that popes had developed at least since the high middle ages and then went into overdrive after the French Revolution. So for instance, when John F. Kennedy told Texas ministers in 1960

I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute, where no Catholic prelate would tell the president (should he be Catholic) how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote; where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference; and where no man is denied public office merely because his religion differs from the president who might appoint him or the people who might elect him,

he was not following church teaching on politics. Neither was he being a good Roman Catholic when he added,

I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant nor Jewish; where no public official either requests or accepts instructions on public policy from the Pope, the National Council of Churches or any other ecclesiastical source; where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials; and where religious liberty is so indivisible that an act against one church is treated as an act against all.⁶

The Second Vatican Council revised the underpinnings of Roman Catholic political theory, but as late as 1962 a Roman Catholic who favored republican secular governments over throne and altar arrangements was deviating from orthodoxy.

In contrast, when American Presbyterians revised the Westminster Confession’s chapter on the civil magistrate, they were breaking with both the Covenanters’ understanding of monarch, Parliament, and church as well as the Church of Scotland’s status within the United Kingdom’s ecclesiastical establishment. But few suspect that

⁶ John F. Kennedy, Speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, September 12, 1960, available at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16920600>, accessed November 28, 2016.

John Witherspoon or Charles Hodge or William G. T. Shedd were heretical Presbyterians for abandoning European patterns of church-state relations. So why did mainstream Presbyterianism's affirmation of the United States' political order lead to an embrace of America's later cultural pattern as incoherent and chaotic as American moral, educational, sexual, and aesthetic standards may be?

For a long time, mainstream Protestants took pride in receiving the kind of credit that Samuel P. Huntington attributed to Calvinism when he wrote as recently as 2004 that "the unique creation of the American creed" owed to Reformed Protestants known as Puritans.⁷ But somewhere around the 1960s with political debates about sex, race, and war, mainstream Protestants backed away from that kind of Christian nationalism and let evangelicals and Rush Limbaugh have it. The problem was that Presbyterians were also abandoning their religious identity—being Presbyterian added value to being American. Once being Presbyterian or mainline Protestant became largely indistinguishable from going to an elite secular college or university and voting for Democrats for the White House, people wondered why be Presbyterian? What value does it add to what an American can do by some other state or non-government agency?

Milton J Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks were aware of the problem when they wrote the last volume in the major analysis of *The Presbyterian Predicament*. Almost twenty-five years ago they observed:

The central challenge before mainstream Protestants is to recognize our cultural and religious displacement and the need to recover our identity as Christians and bearers of particular traditions that contribute to the richness of the Christian family. We are being thrown back on our own resources and on God, who steadfastly sustains and guides us through all the predicaments in which we find ourselves.⁸

That recognition prompted the authors' recommendation of a "theological agenda" that would prompt the church to recover its identity. The problem for Presbyterians who inhabit (or want to) mainstream American circles is that theological agendas are impolite. In the 1920s J. Gresham Machen understood the conflict that was opening between Presbyterian theology and mainstream American culture. Modernism was, after all, the self-conscious adaptation of Christianity to modern culture. Machen understood that if Presbyterians were to preserve the faith they confessed, they would have to do more than sing, as they did every Reformation Sunday, "Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also." Now that the bankruptcy of such adaptation is apparent, American Presbyterians are understanding how alien and sideline Reformed Protestantism is to mainstream American society.

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⁷ Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to American National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 68.

⁸ Milton J Coalter, John M. Mulder, and Louis B. Weeks, *The Re-forming Tradition: Presbyterians and Mainstream Protestantism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 287.

ServantReading

The Tragedy of U.S. Foreign Policy *by Walter A. McDougall*

A Review Article

by Darryl G. Hart

The Tragedy of U.S. Foreign Policy: How America's Civil Religion Betrayed National Interest, by Walter A. McDougall. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016, x + 408 pages, \$30.00.

No matter where you come down on the Christian origins of the United States, rare are the American believers who think the nation's foreign policy should conform to Christian norms. Should the United States, for instance, establish diplomatic ties with nations of like faith and practice? That is the way that the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) conducts its foreign policy—better known as ecumenical relations. But if nation-states conducted their affairs based on religious identity, would Christian nations only establish treaties or enter alliances with other Christian nations? Such a question was thinkable during the early modern era of confessionalization—the time when a European nation's religion was synonymous with its national identity: the Dutch were Calvinist, the English were Anglican, the French were Roman Catholic, and the Scots were Presbyterian. That early modern pattern prevailed until the late eighteenth century when the United States was founded to be a new order for the ages (*novos ordo seclorum*), a nation without an established church and no religious tests for holding federal office. At that point, religious questions receded to the background of foreign policy. Instead, order, stability, and prosperity became decisive.

Or not.

Although the United States was not officially a Christian nation, it did have a civil religion, equally unofficial, but far more decisive for the way its officials conducted foreign policy. Walter McDougall traces the effects of American civil religion (ACR) on the nation's foreign affairs in a book that is as sobering as it is riveting. ACR came to the attention of scholars during the 1960s when the sociologist Robert Bellah detected in a “hip, young, liberal, rich, Harvard-trained Catholic” president, John F. Kennedy, a manner of describing national purpose that invoked divine will.

For instance, in his 1961 inaugural, Kennedy asserted “the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God.” He added that “here on earth God's work must be truly our own” (25). McDougall argues that Bellah

should not have been surprised to discover such affirmations. He observes that most nations in the West (at least) have “required some transcendental glue to cement their citizens together and give their polity purpose” (26). Americans were no different and the founding generation employed English understandings of divine favor to give Americans confidence that God was on the side of the new nation. This “classical” ACR, as McDougall calls it, lasted until the wrenching challenges of the Civil War and morphed subsequently into a Progressive version in which the “march of the American flag” around the world was part of the nation’s fulfillment of God’s promises to the United States (122). The Progressive ACR underwent revisions over the course of the twentieth century but sustained US foreign policy and shared understandings of national purpose through two world wars and the Cold War. It yielded finally to a post-Cold War Millennial ACR during the 1990s that styled itself “a global civil religion for all humankind.” As McDougall sees it, President Obama “exploited his high priestly office to invite all Americans—not just Protestants, Catholics, and Jews—to join the human pilgrimage toward ‘community, prosperity, mutual care, stewardship of the Earth, peacemaking, and human rights’ ” (351).

Readers will likely recoil from ACR’s rhetoric depending on their political party affiliation and the president responsible for invoking divine blessing, but McDougall’s book is a powerful reminder of how central civil religion has been to rationales for American wars and additional interventions around the world. In 1900, after the Spanish-American War when the United States started to throw around its global muscle, Senator Albert Beveridge, a Republican from Indiana, defended William McKinley’s colonial acquisitions of Cuba and the Philippines by attributing to America a “divine mission.” The nation “holds all profit, all the glory, all the happiness possible to man. We are trustees of the world’s progress, guardians of its righteous peace” (124). Most Americans remember Woodrow Wilson’s iteration of the Progressive ACR when he described the First World War as a conflict “to make the world safe for democracy.” Less familiar is Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s depiction of the Second World War as a contest between those “guided by brutal cynicism, by unholy contempt for the human race,” and the Allies who were “inspired by a faith that goes back through all the years to the first chapter of the Book of Genesis: God created man in His own image” (215). ACR only picked up momentum during the Cold War when the United States could contrast its affirmation of “in God we trust” to the Soviet Union’s avowed atheism.

If these presidents’ confidence in reading providence troubles the theologically minded, the churches’ role in underwriting the appeal and authority of ACR is even more disconcerting. Throughout the book McDougall follows the reaction of church leaders and theologians to American foreign policy and finds “never was heard a discouraging word.” In the run-up to World War I, Protestant clergy separated into three camps—militarists, pacifists, and moderates—but few challenged the idea that the United States had a redemptive role to play on the stage of world affairs. Protestants as diverse as the Yale Divinity School dean, Charles Reynolds Brown, and the evangelist Billy Sunday, equated the United States and divine purpose: Brown believed the country was “called of God to be in its own way a Messianic nation,” while Sunday boasted that “Christianity and Patriotism are synonymous terms” (154). By the time that the United States had fought in another world war and used atomic weapons to end it, McDougall writes, Protestants “tacked and fell into line behind the flagship of state” (249). The National

Association of Evangelicals worried less about *the* bomb itself than who “controlled” it. The Federal Council of Churches called on Americans to be “deeply penitent” about the taking of innocent life but would not abandon its support for US foreign policy in its fight against Soviet Communism. Some Protestants did express reservations about the implications of US engagement of world affairs. Reinhold Niebuhr cautioned officials and citizens about the dangers of pride and self-righteousness as a “God-blessed” America combated the godless Soviets. But McDougall also wonders if Niebuhr merely encouraged a “stealth hubris” in which a concerned American Christian could “take on a Niebuhrian pose of being troubled by the implications of power—only without remorse or charity” (266).

One other Protestant who dissented from the churches’ endorsement of American exceptionalism and the nation’s civil religion was J. Gresham Machen. McDougall notices that at the end of World War I Machen condemned Woodrow Wilson’s foreign policy as a “terrible crime against the truth” (164). In fact, Machen, who served in the YMCA during the war, returned to Princeton Seminary and delivered a chapel talk in which he worried that American success in defeating Germany had twisted the churches’ ability to proclaim the gospel. The rhetoric of war and victory had produced a “profound satisfaction with human goodness” on the part of those who had served on the winning side because they had defeated “a convenient scapegoat”—Germany. “In attending to the sins of others,” Machen warned, “men have sometimes lost sight of their own sins” (379). The real remedy for national pride, he argued, was to remember that the returning soldiers were still sinners despite their heroic self-sacrifice. The only source of goodness for fallen men was in “the goodness and greatness of Christ” (380).

Whether McDougall’s book will trouble Christian or non-Christian Americans more is hard to predict if only because the entire country, irrespective of party affiliation or church membership, has drunk so deeply at the trough of ACR. The foreign policy lesson of his argument is to find a way to calculate national interest in distinction from messianic dreams of national greatness. White House and State Department officials may be poorly equipped to make that distinction since the United States’ redemptive status in world affairs is hard wired into the nation’s self-conception. But for the nation’s Christians, who should know a thing or two about the differences between redemption through Christ and improvement by foreign policy, McDougall’s book should not be necessary reading. That it is essential for reminding believers of the limits of American exceptionalism is an indication of American Christianity’s uncritical identification with a nation that, however remarkable by earthly standards, is hardly in the league of God’s accomplishments to save his people.

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ServantReading

Synopsis of a Purer Theology by *Walaeus et al.*, ed. Roelf T. te Velde

by Ryan M. McGraw

Synopsis Purioris Theologiae (Synopsis of a Purer Theology), by Walaeus et al., ed. Roelf T. te Velde, trans. Riemer A. Faber, vol. 1. Leiden: Brill, 2015, 659 pages, \$171.86.

This translation introduces a historically important Reformed orthodox text to the English-speaking world. Four professors at the University of Leiden (Walaeus, Polyander, Thysius, and Rivetus) produced this text in 1625 in order to present a “purer” alternative to the theology of the recently expelled Arminians. This present volume is the first of three projected volumes, which include parallel Latin and English text. Since this text remained important in the Reformed world at least through the end of the nineteenth century, modern students of Reformed theology should use it as a means of connecting them to historic Reformed teaching.

This work has many useful qualities. It is inherently important as a summary of Reformed theology of the time. Beginning theological students today are ordinarily surprised to learn that most Reformed authors in the past wrote their major theological works in Latin. This means that many modern readers are cut off from what is arguably the most significant era in the development of Reformed theology. Some sections in the *Synopsis*, such as disputation twenty-one on the Sabbath, express largely Dutch debates. However, most of the chapters will help readers better understand the substance and structure of Reformed orthodoxy from the doctrine of the knowledge of God and Scripture, through creation, man and sin, to the relationship and differences between the Old and New Testaments. The footnotes scattered throughout this volume will also help many readers understand better philosophical, theological, and historical references in the original text.

The Leiden *Synopsis*, however, has some surprising deficiencies. Many discussions are incomplete or qualified inadequately. For example, Thysius mentioned, but largely omitted, the sufficiency of Scripture in his treatment of the perfection of Scripture, in favor of combating papal views of unwritten tradition (107). The definitions of theology, which occupied such a prominent place in other systems at the time, are stated and passed by on the first pages of the book in order to develop the doctrine of Scripture more rapidly. Sin is described as the absence of good, having no metaphysical reality. However, this point can mislead readers without explaining that Reformed authors generally treated sin as an action directed to a wrong end instead of as non-being. Other topics, such as fundamental articles, the decrees of God (subsumed and renamed under providence), and the covenant of redemption, are omitted entirely. Covenant theology comes to bear directly only on disputation twenty-three, which addresses the relationship

between the Old and New Testaments. Covenantal terminology is not explained fully enough to be an adequate source for understanding the nuances of the Reformed development of the doctrine. Many doctrinal treatments in this work are too brief to help modern readers understand the theology standing behind these statements. Several positions are simply stated without argumentation from Scripture. Both of these points, surprisingly, stand in contrast to the shorter *Compendium Christianae Theologiae* from the same time period by Johannes Wollebius.

The *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae* is a very important work of Reformed theology historically. While it is a must-read text from the time period, it will not likely be the best starting point for readers new to reading primary sources in Reformed orthodoxy. It is a synopsis of a broader theological tradition. Its primary value lies in teaching readers what questions to ask and where to look for theological expansion in other Reformed literature. It is possible as well that the English portion of this work might appear separately eventually at a lower cost, which would make it more accessible to a wider audience.

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ServantPoetry

Old and New Year Ditties

Christina Rossetti (1830–1894)

3

Passing away, saith the World, passing away:
Chances, beauty and youth sapped day by day:
Thy life never continueth in one stay.
Is the eye waxen dim, is the dark hair changing to grey
That hath won neither laurel nor bay?
I shall clothe myself in Spring and bud in May:
Thou, root-stricken, shalt not rebuild thy decay
On my bosom for aye.
Then I answered: Yea.

Passing away, saith my Soul, passing away:
With its burden of fear and hope, of labour and play;
Hearken what the past doth witness and say:
Rust in thy gold, a moth is in thine array,
A canker is in thy bud, thy leaf must decay.
At midnight, at cockcrow, at morning, one certain day
Lo, the Bridegroom shall come and shall not delay:
Watch thou and pray.
Then I answered: Yea.

Passing away, saith my God, passing away:
Winter passeth after the long delay:
New grapes on the vine, new figs on the tender spray,
Turtle calleth turtle in Heaven's May.
Though I tarry wait for Me, trust Me, watch and pray:
Arise, come away, night is past and lo it is day,
My love, My sister, My spouse, thou shalt hear Me say.
Then I answered: Yea.

31 December 1860