Theology, Confessions, & Reform

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ALLIANCE OF CONFESSING EVANGELICALS

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What is Theology About?

Donald Macleod[1]

Theology, in a nutshell, is about putting people in a position where they can speak a word about God; and since almost everyone has something to say about God, almost everyone is a theologian. Even the atheist usually has very fixed views about the God he doesn't believe in; and every Christian, including those most dismissive of academic theology, is a theologian when she prays and worships, and when in times of crisis she sets her life in the context of an overruling providence. The very child is a theologian when she sings,

Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.

Down through the centuries, however, the church (and particularly the Reformed church) has taken the view that her preachers and teachers need more than this informal and casual level of theological knowledge: hence the setting-up of Calvin's Academy in Geneva, the theological faculties of the ancient British

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universities, similar American institutions at Harvard, Yale and Princeton, and the Dissenting Academies of England and Wales. In these centres of higher education students were introduced to the study of theology as a rigorous, albeit reverent, academic discipline.

Such study does not introduce theologians to a God different from the one known and worshipped by ordinary believers, any more than astronomy introduces scientists to a set of stars different from those observed by shepherds under the night sky. The difference is that the astronomer brings to his study not only a host of instruments unavailable to the shepherds, but the findings of previous generations of astronomers, procedures honed by constant experimentation and (not least) the resources of a host of ancillary disciplines such as mathematics, physics and chemistry. Similarly, while the subject-matter of theology is unique, the study itself employs the same careful methods and the same stringent standards as apply in other disciplines. These include the study of the scriptures in their original languages, rigorous textual criticism, the scrupulous collation and deployment of evidence, critical awareness of past theological discussion, and constant reflection on the relations between theology and other academic departments (especially philosophy and the natural sciences).

Underlying this study of theology there lay one clear premise: we could not speak about God unless first of all he spoke to us. To this extent Immanuel Kant was right when he argued that human reason could know nothing of the *noumena* (the super-sensible world, including the unseen world of the divine and the spiritual). Its province was limited to the world *of phenomena*, those objects which existed in time and space and were thus accessible to our senses. Here reason could function competently, and here science could do its work. But God was no part of this world, and therefore reason as such could know nothing about him. It could neither prove his existence nor offer any description of him.

This was a powerful argument against those who advocated a religion within the limits of reason alone. Unfortunately, however, its impact went far beyond merely undermining rationalism. It seemed to many to sound out the death-knell of theology. God as

such could no longer be the object of human study; and theology could no longer be 'the science of God'.

If theology were to survive, then, there had to be a radical restatement of what it was about. Several alternatives were proposed, all of them attempts to deflect Kant's criticism and all purporting to offer the possibility of saving theology's reputation as a genuinely scientific discipline.

Under the rubric of Comparative Religion, for example, there could be a truly scientific study of world faiths, yielding genuine knowledge of what the various nations of the earth believed about God.

And under the rubric of Historical Theology there could be a scientifically rigorous study of what had been taught by the great creeds and by the magisterial doctors of the church, past and present. The writings of Athanasius and Augustine, Luther and Calvin, Ritschl and Barth, were, after all, in the empirical domain and thus well within the province of science. They might yield some 'insights'.

But far the most potent influence on modern theology was that of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834). Schleiermacher, brought up in the Pietism of the Moravian Brethren (a reaction to the idea of 'justification by sound doctrine') argued that religion was not primarily a matter of knowledge, but of feeling. The generic religious feeling was the sense of absolute dependence; the specific Christian feeling was the sense of dependence on Christ and his redemption; and the task of Christian theology was to explore the content of this feeling. This was as far as 'scientific' theology could go. It could not study God, but it could study the religious consciousness. Its statements would thus be limited to describing human states of mind, specifically those arising from the believer's experience of spiritual life within the Christian church.

The effect of these approaches is to collapse theology into anthropology. It is no longer the study of God but the study of man, exploring human religions, human histories and human consciousness. Each of these areas of study is in its own way scientific, showing what can be ascertained when reason admits its

incompetence with regard to the *noumena* and confines itself to observable *phenomena*.

hen this happens, the object of theological study is no longer God, but (at best) faith; and while faith can *receive* truth it can never serve as either the *source* or the *norm* of truth. A theology which takes anthropology as its source can tell us what human beings have believed about God; it can never tell us whether what they believed is true or false; and it is precisely because what they have believed has so often been false that humanity's religions have been its greatest crimes.

There remains the further problem that Schleiermacher's approach inverts the order of knowledge and experience. If our knowledge comes from our experience then, presumably, prior to the experience we have no knowledge. What, then, do we have experience of? For example, we may, as Dr. Rowan Williams suggests, deduce at least some theology from our 'religious practice' (the church's liturgy and prayers), but then we immediately come across Augustine's agonised question, 'Who calls upon you when he does not know you?' (*Confessions*, I:1). We cannot experience what we have no knowledge of, either by faith or by sense.

Today, the anthropological, non-normative approach to theology reigns supreme in every secular, faith-neutral university or college which offers courses in theology, and it would be naïve to assume that it does not reign in some Christian institutions as well. Suppose, however, that God could reveal himself to us and that we are created in such a way as to be able to receive such a revelation? Christian theology rests on the fact that he did precisely that. God has revealed himself, and he has done so in two ways.

First, he has revealed himself through what the Apostle Paul called 'the made things' (*tois poiēmasin*, Romans 1:20). In the very act of creating the universe God has given himself visibility and expressed his eternal power and glory. The knowledge which this yields is not that Natural Theology against which Barth protested so loudly: an autonomous discovery for which man himself can take the credit. It is a gift: a movement in which the initiative lies

entirely with God. And it is universal because, as Calvin stressed in the early chapters of his Institutes, God has inscribed on every human heart a *sensus divinitatis*, sown in every breast a 'seed of religion' (*semen religionis*) and stamped on every conscience an indelible sense of final accountability to a divine tribunal (Romans 1:32).

But this 'general revelation' was never enough. Even in the Garden of Eden there had to be what theologians later came to call 'Special Revelation': direct divine words which told Adam and Eve what no star and no flower could ever tell them. It was through such words that man first learned of his commission to colonise the whole earth (Genesis 1:28), and through such words, too, that he learned of the forbidden tree (Genesis 2:17).

After the Fall the need for such special divine words became even more urgent. Now man needed *grace*, and nothing in all creation (and certainly nothing in his conscience) could speak of grace. Forgiveness was God's sovereign prerogative, and only he could announce it. The Psalmist, crying from the depths, knows there is forgiveness, but he knows it only because he can say, 'In his word I put my hope' (Psalm 130:5).

This special revelation did not come all at once. It came, as the Writer to the Hebrews tells us (Hebrews 1:1), 'at many times', and it also came in 'various ways': for example, through theophanies, dreams, visions, prophets and, in the Last Days through 'a Son' living among us in the form of a servant (Philippians 2:7). But then God gave us a final luxury: he committed this revelation to writing, not because this was absolutely necessary, but in order (as the Westminster Confession affirms) to provide greater security for its preservation and transmission than would ever have been possible under the vagaries of mere oral tradition.

or did he leave the task of writing out the revelation to anyone else. He 'breathed out' the words of the Holy Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:16) and 'carried' those who wrote them (2 Peter 1:21), thus ensuring, through the miracle of dual authorship, that words written by men were also the words of God.

These Scriptures are no mere record of revelation or mere witnesses to revelation. They *are* revelation: the word of God

written; or, as Richard Gaffin puts it, 'the Word of God in Servant Form', using human language and accommodated to our capacities.

In all science, as the late T. F. Torrance tirelessly pointed out, the student must accept that we can acquire knowledge of any object only on its own terms. The atom, the rock and even the human cadaver must be allowed to tell us about themselves. The same is true, *par eminence*, of God, whose mode of being as the eternal self-existent Trinity is so far beyond our ken. We cannot take this to mean, as Postmodernism suggested, that the truth is utterly beyond us: we can grasp real truth, though never the whole truth. But we can do so only if God tells us a little of what he knows about himself (his self-knowledge being the presupposition of all theology); and for the Christian theologian this means that we can know him only through his written revelation, the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. These are our torah, the source and the norm of all the words we eventually speak about God. On them, therefore, we must meditate day and night (Ps. 1:2).

This study of the Christian *torah* involves three distinct disciplines: exegesis, biblical theology and systematic theology. Of these, exegesis is the most fundamental: the root, indeed, of all theology. Its underlying premise is the perspicuity of scripture, although the modern pre-occupation with hermeneutics obscures this, conveying the impression that the Bible is a collection of perplexing documents which will yield their meaning only to a special guild of scholars in possession of elaborate interpretative tools. Here, Barth's protest is welcome: hermeneutics cannot be an independent study. Instead, 'its problems can only be tackled and answered in countless acts of interpretation - all of which are mutually corrective and supplementary'. (Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His life from letters and autobiographical texts*, p. 349).

The vocation of exegesis, then, is close engagement with the text: not with its background, not with its sources, and not with its history but with the text itself in its final, canonical form. Each such text was addressed, of course, to a specific situation, but its relevance does not pass with the passing of the situation. God still 'owns' the scriptures as his word for us today.

2

The Rise of Liberal Religion

Andrew Hoffecker[2]

Reformed Christians pride themselves in being well informed of major eras in the development of Christian theology. They can articulate the culmination of early theology in the Ecumenical Councils and Augustine; they are able to frame the careers, writings and confessions of Protestant reformers; and they are generally aware of how evangelicals attempted to maintain the momentum of theological orthodoxy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Similarly, Reformed Christians know when and how various forms of unbelief or divergences from traditional orthodoxy emerged. Arianism and Pelagianism in the early church, Socinianism, Arminianism and Unitarianism in the modern period resulted from self-conscious theological positions that differed radically from their orthodox counterparts.

Arguably the go-to book for understanding the sharp divide between orthodoxy and liberal Christianity in the early twentieth century is Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism*. Machen deftly demonstrated how modernism and historic orthodoxy were not

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two forms of genuine Christianity but radically different religions. He did so by contrasting their respective theological doctrines - their truth claims. Since many acknowledge the effectiveness of Machen's *tour de force*, one might wonder how liberalism survived when its doctrines were shown to differ radically from traditional orthodoxy.

While not the only answer to that question, Matthew Hedstrom's *The Rise of Liberal Religion: Book Culture and American Spirituality in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2013) [hereafter referred to as *ROLR*] offers a unique perspective on why liberal religion not only continued but thrived from the 1920s to mid-century. What may startle conservatives as they read Hedstrom's work is the absence of theological argument. Hedstrom aggressively dismisses theological issues as irrelevant for liberalism's survival. He demonstrates beyond any cavil that liberal religion flourished in the twentieth century because it avoided theology. It offered American culture what it needed to survive.

Hedstrom's title is remarkably apt. His focus is not liberal Christianity but liberal religion. Throughout this meticulously researched and carefully argued book one finds a compelling explanation for why liberalism, despite recent setbacks in the decline of mainline denominations, survived. Religious liberals did so not by working primarily through churches and synagogues - though they continued to participate in institutional religion - but by infusing liberal religion into the culture - (cf., H. Richard Niebuhr's "Christ of Culture" model *Christ and Culture*). Liberals effectively articulated goals, fostered cultural norms and cheered Americans to pursue the liberal vision so that its spiritual agenda became pervasive in American life. Hedstrom provides a thorough acquaintance with a full orbed worldview which entailed a successful business strategy joined with a practical vision for cultural change that became commonplace in America. What is remarkable is that the reader does not encounter a solitary discussion of truth claims. Whenever the question of truth arises, Hedstrom dodges the issue by disdaining doctrine, sectarianism and theological purity in favor of "mystical experience," "character formation" and "truth beyond doctrinal particularities."

From introduction to epilogue in *ROLR* the guiding lights of liberal religion are pragmatist William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* and Quaker Rufus Jones' *Social Law in a Spiritual World*. The fundamental principles articulated in these groundbreaking works on liberal religion gained momentum until they became the cultural religious norms in America. The liberal approaches to religion found in James and Jones were "intellectually engaged, psychologically oriented, and focused on personal experience..." Whereas conservatives in the modernist - fundamentalist controversy got their bearings from past orthodoxies, liberals embraced the present and the future. While conservatives focused their attention on theological defenses of doctrine, liberals took the lead of James who never defended a single doctrine in his pragmatic approach to religion. When liberals on occasion articulated their primary assumptions, they looked like principles long associated with modernist thought: "The characteristic principles of Protestant liberalism - optimism regarding human nature, emphasis on moral education and ethics, and an overarching faith in human progress - led modern liberals to pursue human unity beyond creed or sect and to believe in its possibility."

How did liberal religion accomplish such sweeping success? Hedstrom's answer - through books. Advocates of liberal religion combined "modernizing book business" [read profitable, consumer-driven publishing] with a "modernizing religious liberalism" [read intellectually acceptable, mystically oriented and psychologically useful spirituality]. Liberalism's success in gaining widespread acceptance in American culture owed to the creation of book lists, book clubs and book programs. The primary institution was the Religious Book Club founded in 1927, a year after the origin of the Book-of-the-Month Club.

Book clubs played an essential role in the formation of "middlebrow culture." Whereas "highbrow" and "lowbrow" stood at opposite ends of the cultural continuum, "middlebrow" signified neither an elitist nor a debased culture but simply a middle way. Middlebrow books brought "high thinking and eternal truths down to earth, to be sold alongside other commodities." At stake was

nothing less than to ensure that ordinary, enthusiastic readers would catch the liberal vision and adapt to the modern world.

The Religious Book Club proved to be the perfect vehicle for shaping middlebrow reading norms. A selection committee made up of experts were responsible for drawing up a list each month consisting of a main title as well as several alternatives. Members then could choose from the various options available. The committee had to walk a fine line between maintaining the "priesthood of the reader" - i.e., supporting the "autonomy of the reader" by not prescribing what people *must* read but by giving them options from which to choose - while simultaneously fulfilling the mandate of the club to shape the reading public that needed to conform to middlebrow cultural norms. In short, the committee "would steer readers toward the best books" while readers exercised their autonomous choice by selecting "those texts that best suited their intellectual and personal needs."

At the outset of the twentieth century liberal ideas were dealt a mortal blow by the horrors of World War I. As the decades unfolded, Americans needed help in reconciling the claims of religion and a host of other topics: positivistic science, government bureaucracies, Darwinism, biblical criticism, consumerism, urbanization, etc. [1920s]. Subsequently they struggled with poverty and hunger in the throes of the Great Depression [1930s]. Still later Americans had to deal with the threat, horror and aftermath of World War II [1940s]. The religious solution in dealing with all three circumstances was not what doctrines to believe, creeds to confess or traditional pieties to perform.

The overwhelming religious need for the liberal was practical, pragmatic and experiential. If, as a result of the above traumas, previous religious certainties no longer sufficed, new frameworks had to be constructed. Hedstrom cites cultural theorist Stuart Hall who states that somehow "The world has to be *made to mean*." Only as readers have a framework or worldview, are they capable of understanding it. Liberal religion in the guise of middlebrow culture, according to Hedstrom, "provided a structure that helped make the confusing modern world *mean*." Earthshaking experiences of the early twentieth century necessitated an accessible religious

worldview to enable Americans to function in everyday life. If the needs were experiential, the means of meeting them must be likewise. Hedstrom barely suppresses his enthusiasm for the liberal enterprise: "Here, quite simply, was what the Religious Book Club offered: the best. It delivered the best books written by the best minds selected by the best religious leaders offering the best solutions for the vexing problems of modern living, a discount, to your home, once a month."

Hedstrom marshals overwhelming evidence of liberals' success spread over ensuing decades. Chapter 3, "Publishing for Seekers," rehearses the success of Harper and Brothers' religious offerings. Chapter 4, "Religious Reading Mobilized" explores the popularity of book programs of World War II. When discussing efforts to popularize reading, Hedstrom reproduces eye-catching posters that illustrate how liberals advertised their agenda. Some posters simply celebrated book weeks. Others extolled books that build character. Posters produced by the National Conference of Christians and Jews fostered brotherhood through reading. The latter illustrates liberalism's advocacy of ecumenism and interfaith relations.

The final chapter "Religious Reading in the Wake of War" heralds "American Spirituality in the Wake of War." Hedstrom selects three prominent writers whose books represent the culmination of liberal religion in the postwar period. Representing Protestantism is Harry Emerson Fosdick, who achieved widespread notoriety for his 1922 sermon "Shall the Fundamentalists Win? and later became pastor of New York's prestigious Riverside Church. His *On Being a Real Person* (1943) exemplified liberalism's psychological self-help optimism to "help his readers lead happier, more productive and more fulfilling lives." Representing Judaism, Hedstrom selects Joshua Liebman, whose *Peace of Mind* (1946) sold over one million copies. Liebman integrated Freudian psychology, his own personal faith and the Jewish prophetic tradition. Finally Thomas Merton, whose autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948) explores a twofold conversion - the first to traditional Roman Catholic teaching and the second to the mystical contemplation of Trappist monks. While quite disparate in their

background, Fosdick, Liebman and Merton portray major themes illustrative of the liberal religious enterprise.

Liberal religion was not without its critics, and to his credit Hedstrom addresses the naysayers. The singular most biting rebuke came from H. Richard Niebuhr in a 1927 *Christian Century* article, "Theology and Psychology", bemoaning liberals' embracing the "sterile union" of the marriage of psychology and theology introduced by James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Niebuhr claimed that the "psychological turn" derived from Europeans Kant, Hume and Schleiermacher and James in the United States, "has substituted religious experience for revelation, auto-suggestion for communion with God in prayer and mysticism, sublimation of the instincts for devotion, reflexes for the soul and group consciousness or the ideal wish-fulfillment for God." Hedstrom dismisses Niebuhr's trenchant criticism as little more than a neo-orthodox rant. But Niebuhr goes so far as to say that James' followers "show that religion is an epi-phenomenon - a fiction, indeed explicable but quite unnecessary." Niebuhr's sharpness in tone is reminiscent of perhaps his most famous summary of religious liberalism: "A God without wrath, brought men without sin, into a kingdom without judgment through the ministration of Christ without a cross."

Ironically enough, the critical voice Hedstrom cited most frequently was that of Will Herberg, a conservative Jew, who in *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* attacked the Americanization of religion by liberalism. Herberg's book, published in 1955 at the termination point of Hedstrom's historical survey, castigated the three "religious denominations" of Protestant, Catholic, Jew for sacrificing their theological distinctives in favor of the religion of the "American Way of Life." Herberg contended that Americanized religion was in fact the operative faith of Americans rather than the theological principles and liturgical practices of their respective denominations. Herberg's analysis of a quote by President Eisenhower apropos to liberal religion is worth quoting in full:

> Our government makes no sense,' President Eisenhower recently declared, 'unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith--and *I don't care what it is*' (emphasis added). In saying this, the President was saying something that almost any American could understand and approve, but which must seem like a deplorable heresy to the European churchman. Every American could understand, first, that Mr. Eisenhower's apparent indifferentism ('and I don't care what it is') was not indifferentism at all, but the expression of the conviction that at bottom the 'three great faiths' were really 'saying the same thing' in affirming the 'spiritual ideals' and 'moral values' of the American Way of Life. Every American, moreover, could understand that what Mr. Eisenhower was emphasizing so vehemently was the indispensability of religion as the foundation of society. This is one aspect of what Americans mean when they say that they 'believe in religion.' The object of devotion of this kind of religion, however, is 'not God but "religion." . . . The faith is not in God but in faith; we worship not God but our own worshiping.

ROLR adds not only to our understanding of liberal religion - its vision, strategy and successes in getting its agenda operative in American culture - it also adds to the growing literature of book culture in America. It also reminds evangelicals of the continuing headway that liberalism makes in American life. Conservatives know in their bones the theological shortcomings of liberal religion. Despite relinquishing the truths that make biblical religion the sole sound foundation for life, liberal religion survived the travesties of two world wars. Its optimism has been chastened. And the critique offered by neo-orthodoxy following the period covered by Hedstrom's study should give liberals pause.

Reading Hedstrom's account also gives conservatives a sense of déjà vu. Haven't we seen this before? Yes, we saw it first in the very birth of Christian liberalism. Friedrich Schleiermacher faced a similar cultural context a century earlier in the Prussian capital of Berlin. Just as American liberals refused to retain the heritage of Protestant orthodoxy, Schleiermacher believed that neither

reformation orthodoxy nor Enlightenment rationalism/empiricism provided a worldview capable of sustaining European culture. Having lost faith in the historical Gospel, Schleiermacher sought to define the essence of religion anew. Only a thorough reconstrual of religion - one rooted in experience - would enable it to survive. *In Speeches on Religion to its Cultural Despisers* (1799) Schleiermacher brilliantly redefined religion to safeguard it from dogmatists and rationalists alike. Religion is not essentially rational, mediated through ideas [orthodox theology or deistic beliefs], nor is religion essentially ethical, mediated by autonomous moral choice [Kantian moralism]. Instead religion is sui generis [unique, its own kind]. Religion is unmediated; it is found in mystical God-consciousness. By rooting religion in "feeling" or immediate experience [German *Gefuhl*] Schleiermacher reconfigured religion to appeal to the "despisers of religion", the romantics for whom truth lay not in ideas nor in ethics but in immediate awareness. Liberals of the twentieth century simply updated the constant need to reconfigure religion - they used the middlebrow book culture to promote a pragmatic, psychological and mystical religion that appealed to a readership willing to accept its updated faith.

3

Confessional Evangelicalism: A Change of Mind (Probably)

Carl Trueman[3]

The recent book, *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism* has been stirring up some interest on the web; one aspect does strike me as of potentially particular interest: R. Albert Mohler's use of the term 'confessional evangelicalism.'

It is a term I have used myself, to try to argue for a particular form of Christianity. I am also a member of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, though I think the use of `confessing' rather than `confessional' is significant: we merely confess certain truths together. Further, as my Alliance commitment stretches to little more than writing for an online magazine (I have surely the worst attendance at council meetings of anyone, specifically `zero' in my six years), I think my hypocrisy, if existent, is minimal.

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Anyway, to return to my use of confessional evangelicalism in arguing for a particular form of Christianity, I use the term `Christianity' here, rather than `evangelicalism' because I am not persuaded that the latter actually exists as anything other than a loose network of non-ecclesiastical institutions (professional societies, seminaries, publishers etc.). Thus, terms such as `liberal evangelicalism,' `generic evangelicalism,' `open evangelicalism,' and `confessional evangelicalism' all run the risk of mistakenly assuming the real existence of a sort of Platonic ideal of `evangelicalism' in which they each participate. In other words, they each imply a realist view of evangelicalism; I am increasingly a nominalist in my approach. Evangelicalism, at least as a doctrinal movement as opposed to a network of institutions, does not possess any real existence beyond the imaginations of those who have a vested interest in the idea.

More recently, despite using the term `confessional evangelical' myself, and being a member of a parachurch group which uses a similar term in its name, I have come to believe that there is an equivocation in the use of the word `confessional' here which needs to be clarified.

For a church to be `confessional' means for it to adhere to a particular confession or set of confessional documents. There are two parts to that statement, of course: there is the material statement, in that there are confessional documents involved, documents which teach certain doctrines; and there is the point that the church `adheres' to said documents, i.e., the church has a Form of Government which connects to the confessional documents; as a result, office bearers take vows to uphold certain doctrines as taught in the confessional documents and there are procedures in place to remove them from office should they fail to do so.

Thus is it in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the denomination to which I belong and in which I hold office. To be confessional in this context means that I believe and teach in accordance with the teaching of scripture as I see it summarized in the Westminster Standards; that when I attend session meetings I and my fellow elders are often citing the Standards in our

discussions, because they shape the very way we think and behave in an ecclesiastical context; they are not just bits of paper or expressions of personal belief; they express how we think and shape how we behave at the corporate level; and if one of us falls out of step with the Standards, we will be dealt with according to the procedures contained in the Form of Government and Book of Discipline.

This is where I have become somewhat less enamoured of the term `confessional evangelical.' The term `confessional' is really an ecclesiastical category. It usually means something only in an ecclesiastical context. To connect it to evangelical is not unacceptable - as I noted at the start, I have done it myself - but it is to use the term in a basically equivocal way. When I use the term `confessional' relative to churches, I mean confessional documents connected to procedural canons; when I use it to refer to `evangelicalism' I clearly do not imply the second point. Indeed, for a church to be `confessional,' it has to discipline or expel office bearers who contradict the confessional standards to which their vows bind them. Not to do so would be to make the term `confessional' essentially meaningless. I could claim, after all, to be very much in favour of helping old ladies across the road; but if it is my daily habit to push under a bus any old lady unfortunate enough to cross my path, you might well question my commitment to the safe transportation of the aged across the busy highway.

In short, `confessional', rather like `evangelical,' is a term which is only really relevant when it comes to particulars, in this case ecclesiastical particulars. It is helpful in the current climate in that it seems to refer to those whose personal beliefs are consonant with those of one or more of the great confessions of the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries; but it is of very limited usefulness. It is vulnerable to the same difficulties as the term `evangelical': when one abstracts it from the particulars of ecclesiastical commitment, one actually shatters its doctrinal content because that content is inextricably connected to both the doctrinal confession and the ecclesiastical order of particular churches. Thus, to use the term `confessional' for individual believers outside of a specific church context where confessions are upheld by disciplinary procedures is

to use the term equivocally and, arguably, in an inappropriate manner. One cannot be a `confessional evangelical' unless one is in a confessional church; and then one is a confessional Presbyterian, or Reformed, or Anglican or Baptist or Anabaptist. One is not part of a broader self-conscious movement called `confessional evangelicalism.'

A few weeks ago a friend asked if I would repudiate the title `evangelical.' My answer was `Well, it depends on how it is being used.' I will not typically describe myself as such in the American context (back home in Blighty, the situation is somewhat different for cultural reasons); but I have no objection to it being used as a descriptive term if the person using the terms means such things as belief in justification by grace through faith, penal substitutionary atonement etc. Where it is problematic is when it is used in a way that implies I am somehow part of a wider movement that includes, say, open theists but excludes, say, conservative Dominican theologians. My inclusion with the former and exclusion from the latter would seem to me to be entirely arbitrary, given that, while I have significant disagreements with both, I am arguable slightly closer to the Dominicans than the radical Arminians. That is not to say that I look down on either group; it is simply to make the observation that a confessional Presbyterian has some affinities with both but does not really belong to either.

I did think that `confessional' was a helpful way of highlighting one stream of contemporary evangelicalism; now I am not so sure. Confessions are particular, and I am increasingly comfortable as seeing myself as part of three basic categories: Christian, Protestant, Presbyterian. Within those categories I am happy to have fellowship with those who disagree with me on many things; I am even happy to be involved in co-belligerent parachurch groups which stress particular theological truths; but I have no need of any hypothetical fourth category, however qualified, in order to understand my location in the current religious scene.

4

What Luther Says to This Confessional Age

Carl Trueman

We live in a confessional age. Not in the good sense of, say, the Westminster Confession or of principled Presbyterianism. Rather, the grim cult of counterfeit authenticity seems to mean that every scoundrel and charlatan can find absolution for their sins simply by declaring them in public. We have come to expect this from Hollywood stars and politicians but it has started to make inroads into a Christianity which has been subject to the corrosive effects of sentimental emotivism and had its tastes shaped by an age which loves to excuse its excesses. Putting on a hang-dog expression and clearing your throat with a 'I broke this and that commandment' are now apparently the only preparation needed before opining on anything as a moral authority. Even those of more personal integrity are scarcely immune to this plague of humble self-promotion. Some pastors seem to think that the pulpit (or the plexiglass lectern) is transubstantiated every Sunday into Oprah's couch.

Frankly, the Bible gives little basis for the kind of baring of the soul which has become so popular. Paul is very thin on details

when he talks about his own sins. The examples of sermons in the Bible contain little parading of personal peccadilloes. The failings of the preacher when referenced are merely of the order of brief bridges to discussion of issues which transcend the particularities of the preacher's own existence.

Yet, interestingly enough, confession lay at the heart of Luther's own personal Reformation Christian life. But it was not the confession of the self-obsessed exhibitionists of our social media age. It was the private confession of one Christian to another. Our confessional age is an age where the baring of souls is seen as an act which makes the confessor vulnerable or 'authentic' and thus serves ironically to enhance their authority or invulnerability. That might sound strange, but who in this present age can criticize the person who has told the world that they suffered abuse as a child or has wrestled with some addiction for many years? The canons of taste offer immediate, and sometimes total, protection.

Luther's notion of confession was somewhat different. It took place in two contexts. First, there was the confession which was embodied in the liturgical structure of the worship service. The minister would read the law, pray a prayer of general confession and then offer words of absolution. Many Reformed and Presbyterian believers can recognize something of their own liturgies in this. Indeed, only recently one member of my congregation commented on how the confession of sin and the words of forgiveness were something which had proved vital to him over the years.

Yet Luther also considered personal, private one-on-one confession was also valuable. Now, Luther would not make such confession compulsory for Christians because he did not think it right to make such into a new law. But he did regard it as extremely helpful. Here is what he said in a sermon preached on March 16, 1522:

> I will allow no man to take private confession away from me, and I would not give it up for all the treasures in the world, since I know what comfort and strength it has given me. No

> one knows what it can do for him except one who has struggled often and long with the devil. Yea, the devil would have slain me long ago, if the confession had not sustained me. For there are many doubtful matters which a man cannot resolve or find the answer to by himself, and so he takes his brother aside and tells him his trouble....we must have many absolutions, so that we may strengthen our timid consciences and despairing hearts against the devil and against God. Therefore, no man shall forbid the confession nor keep or draw any one away from it. And if any one is wrestling with his sins and wants to be rid of them and desires a sure word on the matter, let him go and confess to another in secret, and accept what he says to him as if God himself had spoken it through the mouth of this person. (*Luther's Works* 51, 99)

Here we see the power of private confession: it is the context in which that powerful confrontational and objective Word from outside can be specifically applied to the individual. The purpose of confession is not for the one confessing to bare his soul and become more authentic. It is to allow the one hearing the confession to press the words of the gospel promise on the penitent and thus free them from the torments that their own sins brought in their wake.

This brings to the fore in miniature that which permeates the Reformation as a whole. We often think of the Reformation as placing the individual Christian in a new place of importance. The institutional church gives way to a believing community. The hierarchical priesthood gives way to the general priesthood of all believers. Today that shift can be read through the later lenses of conversionist pietism, Finneyite revivalism, and even the kind of prosperity teaching with which Americans are so familiar. Yet Luther's revolution was not so much a shift from the institutional church to the individual as it was a shift from the objectivity of the sacraments to the objectivity of the Word that needed then to be grasped by the individual by faith. In other words, it was not the needs of the individual which set the terms of the revolution but the theological status of the Word. Thus, confession is not about

the one confessing. Yes, the specifics of the confession were important; but more important was the great, objective declaration that all sins had been covered by the blood of Christ. The purpose of individual confession was to provide a special reminder to particularly acute and scrupulous consciences of the great, general truth of the Gospel.

Oprah style confessions, now so popular among Christians, are what Luther would have regarded as a form of human righteousness and thus, as Luther would have thought, filthy rags before a Holy God. Making ourselves feel better or (worse) more authentic than others by baring the darkest parts of our lives in a public context is inappropriate for a variety of reasons. But telling a close and trusted confidant of our personal struggles with sin and being pointed to Christ can, on occasion, be a most valuable exercise.

5

The Westminster Confession of Faith Today

Chad Van Dixhoorn[4]

Confessions are doctrinal summaries of the Bible's teaching. They are written by the Church for the Church and the world. They are written for the world because churches with creeds and confessions are trying to be honest about themselves. These doctrinal statements announce that this is a church that has beliefs and is willing to list the most important ones for all to see. This is the very thing that cults and sects refuse to do. When they arrive at your door on Saturday mornings they discuss all things peripheral; their pamphlets hide what they believe and so do their websites.

Things are different in orthodox churches and have been so from the beginning. Not only were the Christians of the early church forced to explain themselves to governors unhappy with

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the exclusive claims of Christians. They also needed to explain their faith simply to new converts wanting summaries of the Bible's teaching. Creeds and confessions serve this purpose well. They summarize what God's word has to say about God and they state succinctly the horror of the fall and then the wonder of the gospel. Although confessions and creeds have sometimes started as signposts to a church's honesty or catalogues of its core beliefs, the best of them have also served as ecumenical charters of some sort. They were meant to be shared, perhaps by many churches for many centuries. That has meant that those who use a confession might not be able to shape each sentence and paragraph just as they would like. But the value of a shared confession is almost incalculable for the church that uses it, for it helps it to express the unity of the body of Christ. Shared confessions such as the Apostles' Creed or the Westminster Confession of Faith unite the church to others which have confessed the same doctrines before. These texts remind us that Christianity was not invented last Tuesday and they affirm that we are united to all those that love and preach what we have confessed in written form. And so a good confession is not only public, but it also strikes the right balance between the pure doctrine of the church and the unity of the church. A confession should state each doctrine carefully, but also humbly. It should plainly confess what is plain in Scripture and, if it is necessary to state it at all, it should cautiously express that which is less obvious.

The Westminster Assembly (1643-1652)

Of course it is easier to announce a maxim than it is to live it out and this was certainly true for the theologians of the Westminster Assembly, for they had to decide how to reform the Church of England and its doctrinal standards. Two years before the famous assembly gathered in Westminster Abbey, a prominent minister named Edmund Calamy urged the House of Commons to reform the English Church. This was no nostalgic look back to the Edenic days of England's boy-king, the evangelical and Reformed Edward VI. On the contrary, Calamy urged Parliament to "reform

the Reformation itself." It was not until 1643 that Calamy's modern reformation took shape in the calling of what proved to be the last of the great post-Reformation synods, the Westminster Assembly (1643-1652).

The Westminster Assembly was instrumental in purging the church of many appalling preachers and filling it with many less appalling ones. It tried to revise, and eventually re-wrote texts for the Churches of England and Wales, Scotland and Ireland. It drafted directions for Church Government, published a guide for public worship, issued statements on doctrine, corresponded with foreign churches, authored two catechisms and wrote a new Confession of Faith.

Really, Edmund Calamy and his colleagues should have been very pleased, but he was not. The task of revising or writing documents like a Confession looked easier that it really was. Then (as now) there were too many architects wanting reform and not enough builders who could actually effect it. While individual ministers could individually state their own understanding of the Bible, it was much harder to do this as a group. The experience was frustrating, leaving Calamy to mourn that "noe man knows what this reformation is. This is a sin & misery."

THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH TODAY

In 1644 Edmund Calamy was in despair but by 1646 the Assembly had managed to finish its great Confession. The end product was worth celebrating and still is today. Indeed it is a truly remarkable text in the history of Christianity and all who peruse its pages will find a sure-footed summary of Christian truth for the Christian life.

Its opening pages rejoice in the wonder of God's revelation of himself in the world and in the Word. Whole paragraphs linger over the fullness and clarity of the Scriptures, and show marked deference to the authority and finality of the Bible's sixty-six books. With devotion and delight, the Confession goes on to consider the God who reveals himself in all his perfections. With reverence and awe the Westminster divines strive to say what can

be said of the God who is one and the God who is three. The glories of the eternal God occupy some lines; the "most loving, gracious" and "merciful" character of God occupies others.

Further chapters remind us that our God has ordained or ordered "whatsoever comes to pass." This plan of the eternal God was settled from "all eternity." And from the beginning God's plan or counsel for the ordering of all things is "most wise and holy." What else could it be? This plan is worked out in the creation of the world and in the care of the world. Three breathless sentences open up the wonder of creation; the remainder of the Confession shows how "God the great Creator" providentially "upholds" "all things", or, as the letter to the Hebrews says, "he sustains all things by his powerful word" (Heb 1:3). As we would expect from a God who has decreed and created all things, God's upholding is no bare upholding. Not at all. He "directs, disposes and governs" his creation - all of his creatures, all their actions, and all of those parts of creation that cannot act. This comes as no surprise for those who are familiar with almost any part of the Bible but, as usual, the footnotes in the Confession point to selected portions of Scripture to make the point. Is not this all-encompassing providence portrayed so vividly in the dreams sent to King Nebuchadnezzar and explained by the prophet Daniel? Is not God's providence the wonder for which the Psalmist praises the Lord, the Lord who "does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths" (Ps 135:6)? Reflection on the lines of the Confession often lead to the study of the words of Scripture. Few other exercises can provide such rich returns on one's investment in time.

And so it is that chapter by chapter, the Westminster Confession of Faith traces with bold strokes the great history of our redemption. The sad realities of the fall, God's gracious covenants with man, the stunning announcement of salvation, and our sure hope of eternal life - all these are sketched out here in bold, but considered strokes. Who can read this text and not be warned that those who ignore the Holy Scripture are doomed to stumble through the world in darkness? And who can read this Confession and not see that those who embrace the true God,

believe what he promises, and walk by his precepts, will never be without a guide or a light for this life? It is because of the clarity of this gospel message in all of its parts that the Westminster Confession of Faith finds itself in the first rank of great Christian creeds. Perhaps it is the wisest of creeds in its teaching and the finest in its doctrinal expression. Certainly it is a reliable guide to the Scriptures, which are the only guide to God. It is my hope that all who follow its directions will find their way to the Father's home, through the grace and mercy of the Son and by the power of his Holy Spirit.

6

SEMPER REFORMANDA, NUMQUAM REFORMATA

AARON DENLINGER[5]

In the November 2014 edition of *Tabletalk* magazine it featured an impressive lineup of church historians (namely, Bob Godfrey, Carl Trueman, and Scott Clark) discussing the historical origins -- as well as popular uses and abuses -- of the slogan "reformed, [and] always reforming according to the Word of God" (*reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*). Employed as an epithet for the Protestant Reformed church as a whole, the slogan in its fullest form (including the prepositional phrase "according to the Word of God") is apparently "a post-World War II creature" (Clark; p. 17). Godfrey traces the abbreviated slogan (lacking the prepositional phrase) to a 1674 devotional work by the Dutch Reformed minister Jodocus van Lodenstein; Clark qualifies this claim somewhat, pointing out that while Van Lodenstein did in fact juxtapose "reformed" with "reforming" in description of the church, he never used the exact expression "reformed, always reforming," and, for that matter, never qualified "reforming" with the adverb "always."

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The authors agree that the slogan can be put to positive use, either to remind Reformed Christians of their need to bring their piety into line with their doctrine (i.e., always reformed *in doctrine*, always reforming *in life*) or to remind them of the constant need to return to the Reformed faith as expressed in our historic confessions (given our natural proclivity to drift from the same). More often than not, however, the slogan is employed to justify doctrinal or practical innovations in the life of the church, as if "always reforming" means doctrine and worship must never exactly mirror doctrine and worship as it existed in any previous generation. "Always reforming," in other words, becomes the catchphrase of those who are never content with the faith confessed by the saints who have gone before us, and so are always tinkering with the same, invariably for ill rather than good.

Regarding the question of this slogan's historical origins, it's interesting -- particularly in light of the reality that Van Lodenstein never qualified "reforming" with "always" when juxtaposing it with "reformed" -- to find the exact phrases "always reforming" and "reformed" purposefully juxtaposed by an English writer six years prior to the publication of Van Lodenstein's work. The English writer in question was Abraham Wright, a.k.a Abraham Philotheus, a religious conformist at the time of the restoration of Charles II. Wright's work has not figured into historical work on the origins of the phrase *semper reformanda* (for reasons that will become obvious), but perhaps it should. Wright wrote, in 1668, a book called *Anarchie Reviving*, in which he denounced Presbyterians north of the border (i.e., Scottish Covenanters) who justified their lack of conformity as an instance of "freedom of conscience." Wright urged the use of governmental force to suppress such persons. In his view, Scottish Presbyterians were politically seditious and religiously schismatic, in both regards satisfying what he identified as an inherently British "itch... for factions" analogous to the French passion for "new fashions."

Having traced the Covenanters discontentment with civil government and ecclesiastical policies through the successive reigns of Charles I, the "long" and "rump" parliaments, Cromwell,

and Charles II, Wright made the following conclusion about Scottish Presbyterians:

> They could no more endure the Long Parliament with [its] Aristocracie, not the Rump with [its] Oligarchie, nor the Protector with his Olivarchie, then their lawfull Prince with his regular Monarchie. In a word, what they are in Church they are in State; always Reforming, but never Reformed.

Wright's juxtaposition of "reformed" with "always reforming," obviously intended as a slur, results in something different than the slogan eventually embraced by the Reformed church to identify herself. One does wonder, however, if Wright -- who was actually a fairly clever writer -- wasn't intentionally punning an already existing phrase which Scottish Presbyterians employed (perhaps in defense of their ongoing efforts to achieve the church they envisioned in the face of political resistance) when he described his literary targets as "always reforming, but never reformed." In other words, Wright's comment could be read as historical evidence -- however slender -- for a pre-1668 use of the exact phrase "reformed, always reforming." At the very least, it may point to the need to keep open the question of when the precise phrase "reformed, always reforming" originated, regardless of what the literary record tells us.

In any case, the particular result of Wright's juxtaposition of "always reforming" with "reformed" may provide us with a useful label to affix to those who champion the slogan *reformata, semper reformanda* towards mischievous ends. Those who constantly tinker with the Reformed faith, and excuse their actions as a matter of "always reforming" (Clark mentions Karl Barth, mainline liberals, and recent Federal Visionists in particular) might best be labeled "always reforming, but never reformed." Being "reformed," after all, means *arriving* at the doctrinal positions of the historic Reformed symbols, not *starting* from there to travel elsewhere.

The Latinization of Wright's phrase would gives us the slogan, useful for describing such Reformed dissidents, as *semper reformanda, numquam reformata*. And since, as Michael Bird recently reminded us,

"Latin is cool," why wouldn't we want to supply ourselves with another handy Latin phrase, particularly one which—like the bulk of our Reformation era Latin slogans—serves to situate us in relation to those with whom we disagree?

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