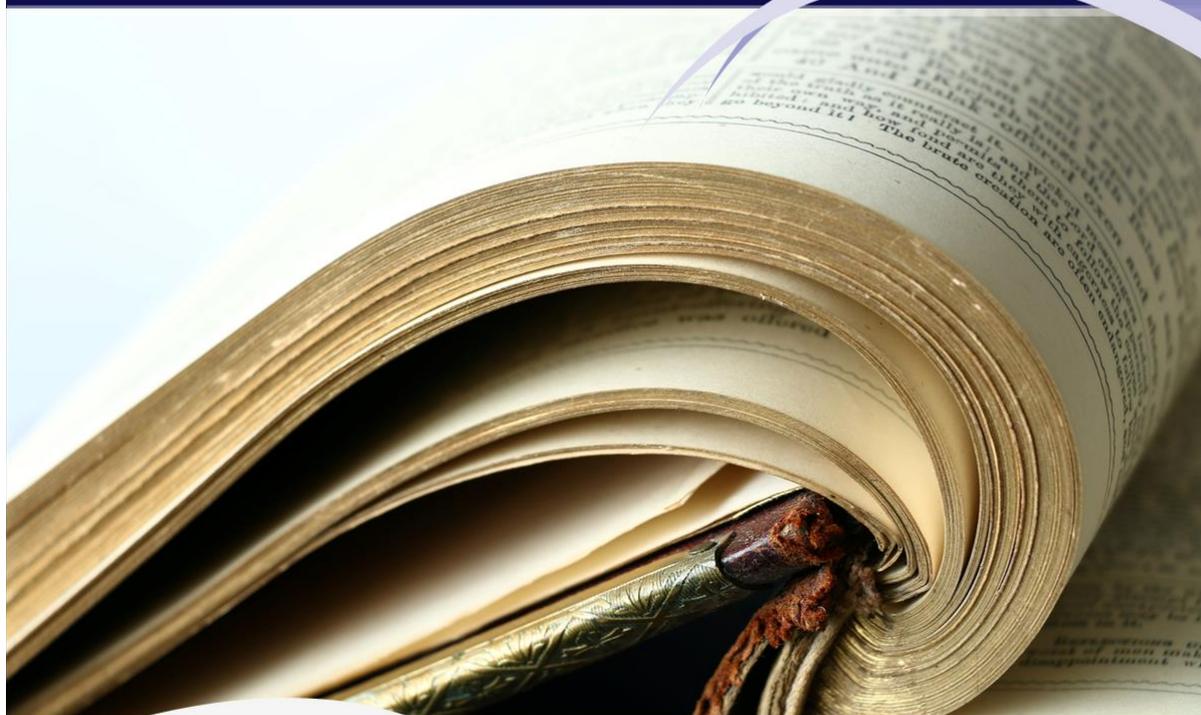


Being Presbyterian Papers



Aspects of Reformed Traditions: Some Reflections

Professor Ian Hazlett

Hon. Professorial Research Fellow in Church History
Glasgow University Dept of Critical Studies: Theology Section

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ASPECTS OF REFORMED TRADITIONS: SOME REFLECTIONS

Part I: open or closed?

Being Presbyterian movement's subtitle is *An Open Church*. This statement of openness triggered three recollections. FIRST: super Christians in the 4th century AD called Donatists. They kept their churches above reproach, pristine, shielded from sin, and perfectly righteous. They specialized in keeping substandard Christians out of the church and in prescribing penances lasting for years followed by rebaptism. This closed Church of the sanctified, a place open to the righteous only, was challenged by the major Christian thinker, Augustine of Hippo – theologian of grace and greatly admired by Luther and Calvin. Augustine affirmed that there is indeed a role for therapeutic pastoral discipline of offensive behaviour in Christians. But he also insisted that the ministry of Word and sacraments, divine not human things, is not compromised by disreputable clergy or church members. Word and sacrament constitute the permanent spiritual remedy offered to defiled humanity, that is: everyone. Consequently, the church is an omnibus with destination deliverance for unseen true believers on board, who are God's, not the church's, elect. The visible church is a mixed body of good and bad, wheat and tares, side by side and within one person. Hence the human face of the earthly church is flawed. As the Reformed orthodox Westminster Confession of 1647 put it: "The purest churches ... are subject to mixture and error" (chap. 25.5).

The Donatists (and equivalents) envisaged the Church as a gated community or elite sect immune from moral and spiritual defects – out there, not among or in themselves. It was also against such perfectionism that Reformation theology declared that authentic Christians are simultaneously saved and sinful, conflicted, but being nudged away from the latter aided by the "seals of God's covenant": baptism and the Lord's Supper.

SECOND: in theory, the Reformed branch of the Reformation also inherited Augustine's inclusivist catholic attitude. He had stressed the importance of that word which also appears in some Reformed confessions and catechisms. But eventually, some churches adopted selective postures: since bad behaviour cannot be reconciled with membership of the body of Christ as portrayed in the Lord's Supper, or with "Christian witness," surely only the sanctified "worthy" should have access to communion, a "holy" thing. This resulted in some churches having a visibly "fenced

table” manned by elders practiced in moral surveillance. Permitted to “enter the gates” were only those qualifying by virtue of renewed declaration of faith, monitored virtuous lifestyle, and knowledge of doctrine. Passes (communion tokens) were issued in advance to secure entitlement. The Lord’s Table was closed to (manifest) sinners, the ignorant, and children.

This prior, spiritual, and moral health-check was why until recent times at a communion service, much of the congregation departed just before the sacramental ceremony began. It was a strange sight. This was not because they were adjudged unworthy by a righteous minister and elders. Rather, following “self-examination” they felt unsuitable or simply not “good enough.” Not wanting to be guilty of disrespecting the sacramental body of Christ, they tacitly excommunicated themselves in public view. The pastorally questionable and undermining dimension of this old Presbyterian practice was obvious.

If not the case in all Reformed churches, the contemporary Church of Scotland prefaces Communion by announcing that “This table is open to all those who love the Lord Jesus Christ” – the principle of the open table. The decision is left to individuals, not external assessors. Paradoxically, Scottish churches still issue communion tokens. But these are not compulsory for admission to the sacrament, rather a means of direct contact between elder and church member, a way of checking and updating the roll of current church members, and a means of pastoral alert if a member is regularly absent from the sacrament.

THIRD recollection: it used to be said that one could often easily identify a Reformed or Presbyterian church building, apart from any that had inherited or copied traditional Catholic architecture externally. It was mostly closed. The Reformed building, looking more like a pagan temple, did not resemble a “church.” God’s temple was the people, not the building, as reiterated in the Bible. The plain building also refrained from displaying any Christian symbols or imagery. It was a meeting place or house for praise, sermons and fellowship, an auditorium reflecting the centrality of the preached Word and very fit for purpose. The building was only opened for that. Disappointing maybe for some passers-by or religious tourists. However, such Presbyterian churches, while not “sacred spaces”, were still necessarily “with walls.” This contrasts vividly with the New Testament church and the first 300 years of early Christianity when there were no dedicated church buildings anywhere, since the religion was outlawed.

Part II: diverse and one?

The mission statement of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (from nearly 30 years ago) refers to its “respect for diversity” within it. That is sensible. Historically, that church embodies a coalition of relatively variegated traditions of theology, spirituality and culture. Attempts to stamp it definitively with a more uniform and restrictive identity have been at odds with that. History cannot be easily airbrushed out. And keeping a safe distance from both modern Christian thinking and parts of one’s inheritance may not be productive.

A consequence of the Protestant Reformation’s inability to reform the Old Church from within was secession, thereby creating new churches. Initially few, they later became multiple. In Early Church and in Catholic tradition, divisiveness and going one’s own way in a stubbornly doctrinaire manner was considered as proof of heresy. Roman Catholic opinion saw Protestant Churches in that light. The venerable Christian axiom of One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism and One Church no longer reflected reality.

The new churches which emerged at the Reformation were Lutheran and Reformed along with quickly suppressed baptist and spiritualist communities. They were followed by episcopalian, presbyterian congregationalist and other baptist formations, all claiming divine legitimacy. Yet even within these options, there were varieties of theology, style and politics accompanying the official “confessional” identity. This was not just accidental. It was inevitable in all churches which stood by the supremacy and exclusive authority of Scripture – the “written Word of God”, or the slightly modified “Word of God as set forth in the Scriptures” or “as contained in the Book of ...” There already is a wide spectrum of theologies, pieties and experiences in the Bible. These reflect different responses to the one overarching divine revelation and truth expressed in “diverse manners” (Westminster Confession).

The varied perspectives, perceptions and traditions within Scripture were mirrored by and within the various church traditions or denominations. Once the Protestant Reformation declared “Scripture alone” as a key principle, it was soon realized that the Bible was not a treasure-trove of indexed easy answers on all issues. There was backtracking on the mantra of the “clarity of Scripture”, causing the Westminster Confession to assert later that “All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all”. Instead, informed interpretation has to

kick in, the arbiter being “the Holy Spirit’s illumination”, that killer of literalism, since “human” interpretation is fallible.

At the time, all sides in any controversy accused opponents of interpreting the Bible wrongly. A favourite metaphor was Scripture as a *wax nose*, “forming it into all shapes”, said Calvin, “twisting it this way or that”, said Luther. Catholics also invoked it when warning of the dangers of “personal judgement” so that “there are as many opinions as there are people” – it is more salutary to accept in faith and trust the interpretation authorized by the church.

Once the Reformation followed the axiom that the Church is not lord over Scripture, instead: subject to Scripture, then the floodgates of debate over (correct) interpretation were opened. Democratic access to the Bible and the inalienable right to “private judgement” –were principles which were very soon tempered in the Reformation. In the early Reformed and Presbyterian Churches, the original means of shepherding individualistic and subjective “private judgement” towards informed “consensus” or conflict resolution was the public collective “exercise” in biblical interpretation. Out of that evolved the “presbytery”. The optimistic hope was to prevent contradictory preaching and confusion arising out of apparently multi-vocal or obscure Scriptures.

In his *Letter of Wholesome Counsel*, John Knox urged that in the understanding of Scripture, “the judgments and spirits of men should be tested” with a view to corporate agreement. He warned against “multiplication of words, convoluted interpretations and self-opinionated reasoning” as “unedifying”. In the preface to the Latin version of his Long Catechism, Calvin highlighted that Christ and his truth are one, and reiterated that “growing up” into one body and one spirit requires Christians to unanimously proclaim “the *sum* of faith.” Further, causing “dissension in religion ... profanes baptism” (the epitome of one faith), since discord “inflicts a deadly wound on the Church.”

Coping with unity and diversity at the same time is at the heart of the iconic crest of Scottish and Irish Presbyterianism, the Burning Bush, borrowed originally from the French Reformed Church. It is usually seen simply as a badge of liberation from the fires of bondage and sufferings (Exodus 3). But the indestructible bush’s wider context is the indissoluble bond between continuity and dispersion, oneness and diversity, God and individuals – the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob, and of

Moses too. Yet these were all markedly dissimilar characters with hugely different experiences. There began theology of multiple and variable witnesses.

PART III: Reformed confessional theology: tightly bound or flexible?

“Reformed” theology originated in the eucharistic controversy between Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli in the 1520s. Disputed was Christ’s presence in the sacrament – spiritual, or truly corporal as well? In the rite, how literally and credibly are Christ’s words to be taken? Following blistering tract-warfare and then a conference, both parties could neither agree nor agree to differ, and rejected via media proposals. For Luther, God’s own Word and salvation were at stake and he rejected fellowship with his opponents. This led to a fracture within Protestantism, seriously damaging to the Reformation, resulting in a split between “Lutheran” and “Reformed” churches – a PR disaster. Years later, Calvin reported that a major reason for not having left the Roman Church earlier was the scandal of controversy among the Reformers over the body of Christ, bearing in mind the old diagnostic that heretics identified themselves by disputing among themselves. This fateful bifurcation was occasioned by one verse in Scripture and how to interpret it: 1 Cor 11:24. Yet from the beginning, the Reformed side, less doctrinaire, never saw the difference of opinion as a hindrance to intercommunion.

A major difference between Lutheran and Reformed wings was the status of confessions of faith. The former has always abided by a single confession, the Augsburg Confession (1530), constitutive of the Lutheran doctrinal package known as the Book of Concord. The Augsburg Confession has been seen as unchangeable and a binding norm. This means it is more “canonical” than a “subordinate standard”. But this does not make it a second source of authority or revelation parallel to Scriptures. As Luther said: “Our Confession *is* Scripture”, which is why it can be neither changed nor dispensed with.

In contrast, there was a plurality of broadly “Reformed” confessional statements up to the mid-17th century – about 25. Describing them all as “Calvinist” (a term despised by Calvin) is reductionist, since the characteristic Reformed theology embodies a consensus between the approaches of Zurich (Zwinglian), Geneva (Calvin and Beza), and Heidelberg (some accommodation to Lutheranism). These confessions emerged in regions with a Reformed presence such as Switzerland, France, the Netherlands, south Germany, England, Scotland, Ireland, Hungary, Bohemia etc. For English-speaking Protestants, influential summaries were the English *42/39 Articles*, the *Scots Confession*, the *Heidelberg Catechism*, the *Second Helvetic Confession*, and then in the era of scholastic Reformed orthodoxy

(which included double predestination as an article of faith, but not any form of church government): The Canons of the *Synod of Dordrecht*, the *Irish Articles*, and the *Westminster Confession*.

The latter, sometimes denigrated for the wrong reasons, represents the apex of clear articulation (5 years' work) as well as a balance between different theological interests. It is rarely read or studied nowadays, partly due its scholastic vocabulary, and partly due to its Herculean distillation of the Bible, with its accompanying 1500 scriptural references and proof texts. While the *Westminster Confession* still has totemic significance in some Presbyterian churches, the eventual waning of the Reformed orthodoxy it embodied was not primarily due to non-subscribing movements, to Arian, Unitarian and sceptical tendencies. It was hastened rather by 18th and 19th century Pietism and Evangelicalism. These embodied a massive shift from cerebral Reformed confessionalism to energizing evangelical catholicity and the primacy of experience and feeling. Crucial was the modern Protestant reinstatement of free will and personal choice in matters of faith and doing good – alien to the Reformation for which faith and morals were activated by God and the Spirit rather than autonomous discrimination or self-interest,

For the learned and those with time to read big books, the chief large-format bestseller of Reformed theology has been Calvin's *Institutes*, over 1200 pages. Calvin's *Institutes* provides the chief clue. Responding to the question of how one can make sense of Scripture, his book offers a "guide" or a "key to the understanding of the Bible" as a whole. The Reformers had learned early on that Scripture idiosyncratically used by individuals or special-interest groups could engender melt-down and complete theological deregulation. This realization meant that the "plain meaning" approach to Scripture was not always secure.

How can one understand Reformed confessional variety, possibly baffling and intimidating for some? Does it imply uncertainty? Confessions concurred on the essence, sum and fundamentals of the faith, framed as biblical and trinitarian. This does not mean that they thought the same on everything. The historic keynotes of the Reformed tradition were flexible: fluidity, pluralism, multiplicity, provisional, relative ("we, here, now, confess this") rather than a single harmony, mutual recognition, openness to change, qualification or reservation if there is biblical justification, and freedom to welcome and authorize foreign confessions – as happened in early-modern Scotland. None bound the conscience irrevocably.

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