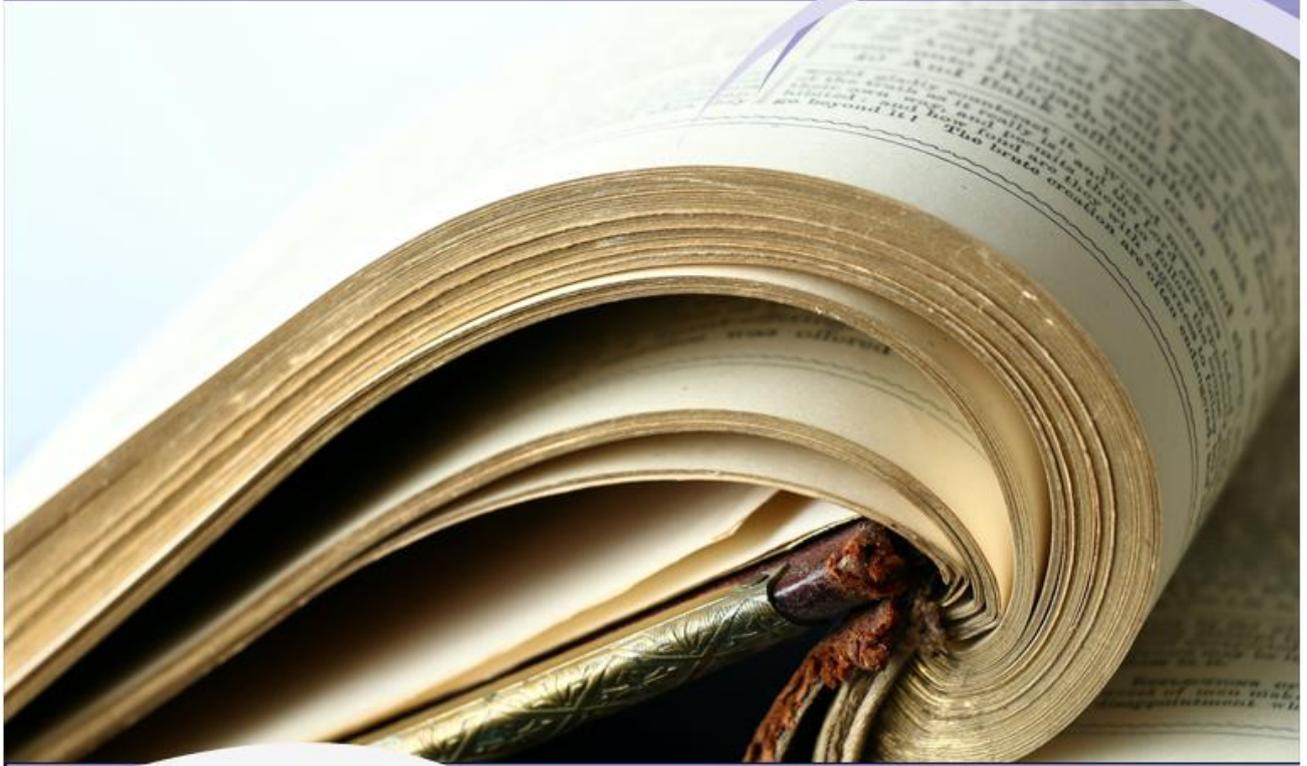


Being Presbyterian Papers



Being Presbyterian in an age of 'new Calvinism'

Dr Sylvia McCracken

May 2021

Being Presbyterian in an age of 'new Calvinism'

Introduction

This essay has emerged out of concern for members, elders, and ministers of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) who say their voices are not being heard. It does not criticise individuals, recognising that we are all fallible human beings, nor deny our denomination's faithful endeavours over many years. But it does ask questions about being presbyterian in an age of 'new Calvinism', drawing attention to some of the difficulties arising from this religious movement, as I and others have experienced them. The essay draws upon a critical realist¹ understanding of being presbyterian as identity; an overview of 'new Calvinism' embedded within PCI; and consideration of three difficulties arising from this movement.

Being presbyterian: identity

I was born into a family where babies were baptised as a matter of course; teenagers prepared to take first communion sitting on straight backed chairs in 'the minister's room'; and young couples married with short, serious ceremony. Both my parents came from families whose presbyterian heritage could be traced back for many generations. We attended worship every Sunday and frequented the church buildings throughout the week. Long standing friendships were established and, at moments of great joy and sadness, the rituals, and rhythms of being presbyterian brought comfort to us all.

As I grew older, I accepted various roles within our congregation, answering affirmatively to God's call to eldership and ministry, with a sense of responsibility and privilege. I was happy to belong to a denomination that spanned the whole of Ireland, valued its Scottish roots, and ordained women elders and ministers. Presbyterian polity (based on bottom-up decision making, from congregation to presbytery to General Assembly) seemed to work well. Principles of equality, non-judgmentalism, conscience and dissent were prized as integral to maintaining a community of faith. And where there were theological differences, these were recognised and upheld so that congregations could be characterised, (loosely speaking) as 'evangelical', 'ecumenical', 'liberal' 'conservative' or 'charismatic'. As a result, most existing, or would-be Presbyterians, could find a spiritual home somewhere. As 'the Troubles' raged around us, our congregation's association with bodies such as Corrymeela,

Restoration Ministries, and Belmont and District Council of Churches were regarded as beacons of hope by faithful clergy and lay people alike. Friendships established across religious divides enriched and informed my faith - I felt I was free to grow spiritually alongside people whose life experiences and knowledge were different from my own.

From these complex relationships - between me as a person, the family into which I was born, other social structures and systems, cultural ideas, and ideational systems - being presbyterian has emerged as part of my identity.* Interwoven through these social and cultural relationships is my personal relationship with God², a relationship based on experience and summed up by the Bible text that hung on my parent's living room wall: 'God is love' (1 John 4:16). God's love, as expressed in Jesus Christ, has sustained me during some terrible times and directed my life-path both within and without the church. Consequently, being Christian and being presbyterian are interrelated aspects of my identity; identity which has emerged and continues to emerge over time.

Perhaps that is why, as I enter my sixties, I find myself conflicted. My experience of being Christian does not sit comfortably with what has been happening within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) in recent decades. It seems to me, that withdrawal from ecumenical networks such as the World Council of Churches (1980), Judicial Guidelines permitting ministers and elders to exempt themselves from 'acts of ordination or installation' of women (1990), breaking formal relations with the Church of Scotland and the United Reformed Church (2018), stand in stark contrast with Christ's call to unity. Denying baptism to children of homosexual people, or communion to any-one who professes Jesus as Lord, strikes me as theologically questionable and practically discriminatory (2018). And I am not alone in feeling conflicted about these matters. Many people tell me that they are deeply troubled about 'being presbyterian' for similar reasons. They say that they feel disaffected, marginalised, rejected, or hurt. Some have left. Others are simply drifting away, not only from the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, but from Christianity altogether. What has changed to make being presbyterian difficult for so many of us at this time?

* A relational understanding of how we come to be presbyterian can be described as a SAC comprising structures, agency and culture. For a more detailed explanation of this approach see the footnote following the references at the end of this essay.

New Calvinism

I cannot pinpoint the first time I became aware of ‘new Calvinism’³ but as I reflect upon that question, this twenty first century religious movement, with its roots in American evangelicalism and English puritanism, keeps coming to mind. ‘New Calvinism’ appears to be promoted by contemporary writers such as John Piper, Don Carson, Mark Driscoll, Timothy Keller, Sam Allberry, Ray Ortland, Bryan Chapell, and Wayne Grudem, to name but a few.

These pastors, theologians and thinkers have emerged over the last forty years or so, from a variety of religious experience, training, and denominations. These denominations include Baptist, Congregationalist, and Presbyterian mostly in America, but also Anglican in the UK. They have a cross denominational following amongst modern day evangelicals, although a quick survey of literature and websites reveals that ‘new Calvinism’ is both praised and criticised by evangelicals, as well as Calvinist scholars and commentators from other Christian perspectives.

What ‘new Calvinists’ appear to have in common, however, is devotion to a set of theological ideas arising from their understanding of the writings of John Calvin (and others), coupled with a ‘literal’ or ‘inerrant’ use of the Bible. Simply put, these theological ideas may be summed up by the acronym T-U-L-I-P: *Total depravity* – humanity is sinful and opposed to God; *Unconditional Election* – God chooses to save some and not others; *Limited atonement* – only those who are saved through death of Christ will go to heaven those not saved will go to hell; *Irresistible grace* - if God wants you in heaven there is nothing you can do about it; *Preservation of the Saints* - once saved always saved⁴. These theological ideas alongside a 20th century systemization of the *five solae* doctrines of salvation (by scripture alone, by faith alone, by grace alone, through Christ alone, glory to God alone) are expositied and accessed through a wealth of literature, websites, and social media⁵. Such exposition has given rise to ideational systems, perhaps, most notably, complementarianism⁶ which I consider later.

John Piper, in a lecture at Westminster Theological Seminary in 2014, described New Calvinism in terms of twelve features summarised as:

‘having a strong complementarian flavour as opposed to egalitarian, with an emphasis on the flourishing of relationships where men embrace a call to robust, humble, Christ-like servant leadership’, as ‘culture affirming rather than culture denying, while holding fast to some very culturally

alien positions, like positions on same sex-practice and abortion'. He further states that 'new Calvinism 'embraces the local church', is 'aggressively mission driven', 'inter denominational with a strong Baptist element', 'charismatic and non-charismatic', 'puts a priority on pietism with an emphasis upon the essential role of affections in Christian living, while esteeming the life of the mind, following Jonathan Edwards rather than John Calvin', is 'vibrantly engaged in publishing books ... in the world of the internet, with hundreds of energetic bloggers and social media activists', is 'international in scope, multi ethnic in expression and culturally diverse' ⁷.

Complex inter relations exist between these features of new Calvinism, people, churches, religious colleges, and organisations. For instance, the Westminster Theological Seminary (the conservative breakaway from Princeton) and Covenant Theological (the seminary of the Presbyterian Church of America) appear connected to organisations such as The Gospel Coalition, desiringgod.org, Acts29 (including Crosslands), T4G, The Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, Bible Mesh and the Proclamation Trust Cornhill, by both doctrinal principles and an entanglement of alumni, board directors, council members, teaching staff and endorsements.

These connections extend to the Presbyterian Church in Ireland within which 'new Calvinism' appears structurally and systemically embedded. Accordingly, the Gospel Coalition is named as a ministry partner on the Bible Mesh website⁸ which also names Union Theological College PCI as an academic partner. Bible Mesh's doctrinal statement is similar to that of TnT Ministries, which produces teaching materials for children aged 18 months to 18 years of age (Mustard Seeds) and is endorsed by the Proclamation Trust Cornhill. Proclamation Trust Cornhill has a training centre in Belfast with connections to PCI through its staff, speakers, and students. The PCI Special General Assembly Conference in 2017 featured Ray Ortland, who serves on the Council of the Gospel Coalition as does Bryan Chapell, former President of Covenant Theological Seminary, and former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of America. Bryan Chapell was the guest speaker at the PCI *Back to Basics* Conference 2015 looking at the 'resurgence in reformed theology', and at the Westminster Fellowship PCI (www.wfpci.org) Conference in 2020, focusing on 'ministry the Word of God in a post-modern society'. The interdenominational Irish Women's Convention

(www.irishwomensconvention.com) 'shares the basis of faith of Christian Conventions which work closely with organizations such as Proclamation Trust and Gospel Partnerships' and involves some Presbyterians. Bryan Chapell's book *Christ - Centred Preaching* was prescribed reading for the PCI Accredited Preacher Course (ACP), which I undertook some years ago. The PCI ACP course also recommended students use the English Standard Version of the Bible and Study Notes. The English Standard Version of the Bible is described in its preface as an 'essentially literal' translation"⁹. Wayne Grudem is its General Editor. A recent PCI 'consultative' process concerned with 'a biblical framework and pastoral care guidelines for people struggling with gender identity, and their families,' 'pastoral care for same sex attracted people and their families' and 'Credible profession of faith and admission to the sacraments' recommended another author, the editor for the Gospel Coalition, Sam Allberry, and his book 'Is God anti-Gay?' Tim Keller's book *The Meaning of Marriage* is cited in the PCI 'Getting Married' information leaflet. It seems that 'new Calvinist' ideas are preached and taught at every level of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and to all ages. Not by every minister or teacher but by many, including some within the church's educational establishment and organisations affiliated with it.

As John Piper says, 'new Calvinism' is aggressively missional, strategic, local, and global in intent. Thousands of people, including numerous Presbyterians, attended Keith and Kristyn Getty's *Sing* Concert in the Odyssey Arena Belfast in 2019, at which John Piper was the keynote speaker. He, and his fellow new Calvinists, have travelled widely to spread their message¹⁰ even though the reach of the internet and social media is such that they do not have to leave America for the movement to grow. Growth can be measured not only geographically, in terms of established and newly planted churches, here in Ireland and elsewhere, but in terms of 'engagement with culture' including endorsement of politicians or campaigns concerning abortion, homosexuality, transgenderism, and racism. Its political and financial connections are beyond the scope of this essay but worthy of consideration also.

Difficulties

It seems to me that three difficulties arise from the prevalence of 'new Calvinism' in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland which make being presbyterian increasingly difficult for some people.

Firstly, 'new Calvinism' (embedded in the systems and structures of the church) appears to reduce being presbyterian, and indeed being Christian, to belief in a particular set of ideas which sound similar but are not equivalent to the guiding principles of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. This rationalist approach to identity and religion depends upon the premise 'I think this, therefore I am this' - to paraphrase René Descartes (1596-1650). In this light, faith as an aspect of identity is not a matter of trust, or what Luther described as 'a free surrender and a joyful bet on {God's} unfelt, untried, and unknown goodness'.¹¹ Rather it is about adherence to a set of principles or ideas against which faith is measured. Calvin defined faith as 'a steady and certain knowledge of the divine goodwill towards us, which being grounded upon the truth of the gracious promise in Christ, is both revealed to our minds and sealed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit'¹². Accordingly, faith is a transformative *relationship* based on a personal encounter with God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Both being presbyterian and being Christian, I would argue, involve this transformative relationship as part of an emergent process of identity formation. Identity formation, that, as for all human beings, involves our bodies, our social and cultural relationships (including family, school, work, churches (including tradition and doctrine), ideas and ideology (including theology)).¹³ If faith as an aspect of identity is reduced to reason, or intellectual belief in a set of ideas or doctrine alone, people who are embodied (thereby sexually orientated, reflexive, and emotional human beings) are diminished; faith as a relationship of trust in Jesus Christ is diminished; and identity as a complex relational, emergent process is diminished. Such rationalism, it seems to me, reduces 'being presbyterian', to a matter of choice, a religious marker, or an ideational construction.

That is not to say that ideas, as doctrine, alongside church order and worship do not matter within our denomination. Although I maintain that being presbyterian cannot be *reduced* to belief in the confessional statements of 'new Calvinist' organisations, or the Westminster Confession of Faith (adopted by the Church of Scotland in 1647 as part of a political arrangement between the English and Scottish Parliaments) or T-U-L-I-P (a later acronym for the central canons produced by The Synod of Dort, an international assembly held by the Dutch Reformed Church between 1618-1619) it is important to be clear as to what ideas, doctrine or principles are involved in being presbyterian. The

Westminster Confession of Faith and Larger and Shorter Catechisms are established by the Code (The Book of the Constitution and Government of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland) as confessional documents, the *subordinate standards*, of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, not the confessional statements of the Gospel Coalition, the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, Bible Mesh, or the Proclamation Trust Cornhill. 'New Calvinist' principles are not equivalent to the traditional confessions of Irish Presbyterianism. Some of the language used in 'new Calvinist' confessional statements sounds like language used in the Westminster Confession of faith, but usage and interpretation do not necessarily coincide. 'New Calvinism' and being presbyterian are not one and the same thing, any more than the ideas of John Calvin are equivalent to 'new Calvinism'.

Furthermore, whilst ideas as doctrine are important, they are open to collective revision, as the work of the General Assembly, Doctrine Committee, and consultation processes from congregation through presbytery, testify; for example, concerning matters such as divorce and remarriage or the ordination of women or pastoral care for LGBT and their families. Revision takes place within a social and cultural context and ought to reflect people's lived experiences. Indeed, within Presbyterianism, as I understand it, theology is the work of the people, not the work of individuals, or a powerful grouping. It must be slow and painstaking, done in the light of the Scriptures which, as stated by the Code, are 'the Word of God as set forth in the Old and New Testament ... the only infallible rule of faith and practice and the supreme standard of the Church'¹⁴. Which brings me to the second difficulty arising from the prevalence of 'new Calvinism' within PCI – the use of the Scriptures.

Operating within a rationalist doctrinal paradigm as described above, 'new Calvinism's emphasis upon a 'literal', 'inerrant', 'plain reading', or 'biblical' approach, raises some serious questions about how we interpret the Scriptures. For instance, do 'new Calvinists' mean 'literal' in the sense that selected verses from the Scriptures can be used as proof texts for a particular interpretation of the scriptures and understanding of God? By 'inerrant', do they mean that 'every biblical statement - on any subject - is absolute 'truth to the facts' as opponents to Higher Criticism in the late 19th century America maintained¹⁵? By 'plain reading' do new Calvinists mean that the Bible does not need complex analysis so that texts emergent from different historical or metaphorical

contexts can be applied directly to present or future situations or people, by any-one? By 'biblical' do 'new Calvinists' imply that unless the Bible is read from their theological, or doctrinal perspective, any other reading is not biblical?

Throughout the ages, interpreters, interpretation, and social/cultural relationality have been at work when it comes to compiling and reading the Bible? Augustine of Hippo and John Calvin, cited as the inspiration for 'new Calvinism' are no exceptions. For Augustine (354 – 430), living in an era of Roman colonialism and Latin scriptures, allegory trumped literalism where the literal meaning ran counter to 'the rule of love' and the catholic faith. Calvin (1509 -1564), influenced as he was by renaissance Humanism and aspects of medieval scholasticism, regarded scripture as the *verbum Dei* not *verba Dei* ... the *record* of the Word, not the Word itself¹⁶. His figurative interpretation of scripture, Christ focused and inspired by the Holy Spirit, recognised God's 'accommodation' to human's limited capacities in the use of metaphor and story. Thus, biblical stories of creation and Fall (Genesis 1-3) 'are not intended to be taken as literal representations of reality'.¹⁷ As a result, unlike Luther, Calvin eliminated 'a major obstacle to the development to the natural sciences – biblical literalism'¹⁸ and his doctrine and ethics were closely related and adapted to the social and cultural world in which he lived.¹⁹

Currently within PCI, it can feel sometimes like these questions and contextual nuances are overlooked. The Bible and God are treated as if they are ontologically one and the same thing, rather than distinct entities whereby the Scriptures *set out* the Word of God. Consequently, the Bible is reduced to a perfect, unified 'rulebook', rather than revered as a collection of diverse Scriptures pointing to Jesus Christ, continually inspired, and inspiring through the power of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, when 'new Calvinism's' approach to the Scriptures is presented as 'truth' or 'orthodoxy', repeatedly and predominantly, a culture develops, wherein proponents may believe themselves to be preaching, teaching, and living the only proper way to be Christian. Consequently, any-one who does not agree with 'new Calvinist' ideology would not be considered 'a real Christian', or as some-one who does not 'really know God'. Potentially this creates hierarchy and division between those who regard themselves as 'true believers' and those they judge to be unredeemed. Any-one who questions this approach runs the risk of being treated as a troublemaker or even a heretic. Moreover, if power becomes centralised, in the hands of a few like-minded people, or the system for decision making is manipulated for certain ends, there is a danger that other perspectives, especially minority perspectives,

may be ignored or disallowed without proper consideration. The result is pain and a deep sense of alienation for faithful members of the church, perhaps especially it may be said for women which brings me to the third difficulty posed by ‘new Calvinism’ – complementarianism.

Thirdly, ‘new Calvinism’ promotes complementarianism which is in opposition to the stated position of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland²⁰. Heavily criticised within evangelical circles and beyond, ‘new Calvinist’ complementarianism is widely deemed to be under laboured by poor theology and in practical terms to have had potentially abusive effects upon women²¹. Complementarianism maintains that:

‘Adam and Eve were made to complement each other in a one-flesh union that establishes the only normative pattern of sexual relations for men and women, such that marriage ultimately serves as a type of the union between Christ and his church. In God’s wise purposes, men and women are not simply interchangeable, but rather they complement each other in mutually enriching ways. God ordains that they assume distinctive roles which reflect the loving relationship between Christ and the church, the husband exercising headship in a way that displays the caring sacrificial love of Christ and the wife submitting to her husband in a way that models the love of the church for her Lord. In the ministry of the church, both men and women are encouraged to serve Christ and to be developed to their full potential in the manifold ministries of the people of God. The distinctive leadership role within the church given to qualified men is grounded in the creation, fall and redemption must not be side-lined by appeals to cultural developments’²².

‘Complementarianism’ was coined by the American founders of the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (1988) on the back of the Danvers Statement²³. The Danvers Statement was a response to a perceived threat from Christian feminism, secular feminism, and egalitarianism²⁴ and was issued just three years before a Memorial was presented to PCI General Assembly seeking exemptions for those who opposed the ordination of women as elders and ministers. In 2017, the same organisation (the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood) issued the Nashville Statement, two years after the USA Supreme Court decision in favour of same-sex marriage, and one year before decisions about excluding couples in same sex relationships from communicant

membership and baptism of their children were taken by the General Assembly of PCI.

'New Calvinist' complementarianism is based on a creation-fall-redemption interpretation of the Scriptures with human sexuality located in a literal reading of creation; the use of masculine language only when referring to God and a hierarchical conception of the Trinity (contrary to presbyterian creeds and confessions) made equivalent to hierarchical, gendered roles within marriage and the church²⁵. The latter means that 'within marriage the Bible calls men to lead sacrificially, and it calls on wives to recognize and support that leadership (Ephesians 5:21-33). Within the church, the Bible calls on congregations to recognize qualified men as pastors' (1 Timothy 2:12; 3:2. Titus 1:6)²⁶.

Timothy Keller argues in defence of complementarianism that men and women are called to enter these relationships on a voluntary basis and that spousal abuse is unacceptable. Grudem, in a revision of 'new Calvinist' principles, that hitherto permitted divorce on the grounds of adultery or desertion alone (per the Westminster Confession of Faith) reset 'new Calvinist' doctrine to permit divorce in some but not all cases of abuse, cruelty and addiction²⁷. Grudem credits pastors with a counselling role, which necessitates wisdom 'to rightly evaluate the actual degree of harm in individual cases, and whether there's a reasonable basis for hope that the destructive behavior has ended and the marriage can be saved'²⁸. In any circumstances, however, 'restoration of the marriage, if possible, must remain the first goal' with reliance on church discipline which 'frequently' brings about 'a good result and the marriage will be saved'²⁹.

This ideational system, not presented as one among many interpretations and applications, but as 'biblical truth' or 'orthodoxy,' based on a 'literal' reading of the Bible, has come under increasing criticism from many quarters. Theologians concerned with the impact of complementarianism upon women point out that according to 'new Calvinism' women are ontologically equal to men but assigned by God to essential and unchangeable subordinate 'roles', an argument with 'exact parallels to the "complementarian" usage of "role" in classic aristocracy, race-based slavery, and in apartheid, where one's permanent "role" is prescribed by birth'.³⁰

Neither the word 'role' nor the concept implied in its complementarian usage (as opposed to sociological usage) appear in the Bible. Both men and women are commissioned to rule over God's creation – there are women judges, prophets

and apostles described throughout the Scriptures. The proof texts, so often cited to silence and restrict women, are contextualised and open to interpretation. Paul speaks of men and women having differing “ministries” (diakoneō) or “grace-gifts” (charismata, 1 Cor 12:4), none of which are restricted to one sex, and the Scriptures point to mankind (humans) being made in God’s own image ‘male and female he created them: ‘And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth”’ (Genesis 1:27-18). From Calvin onwards, examination of the Scriptures reveals reference to and metaphor depicting God as father and mother, ‘mild, kind, gentle and compassionate,’ an image imprinted on human beings even after the Fall³¹. Christ’s radical treatment of women despite the patriarchal religious and political context in which he lived is well documented; and the misuse and literal application of texts critiqued not least in relation to the Trinity. Kevin Giles argues, for instance, that ‘new Calvinist’ complementarianism runs contrary to the Nicene Creed and older confessions on account of its hierarchical conception of the Trinity. He challenges ‘new Calvinists’ use of ‘proof texting’ and ‘misuse of the word ‘role’, saying: ‘the arguments they present are special pleading, not exegesis. They are reading into the text what men in the past and men today want to be arguing that man rules over woman.’³²

It is almost one hundred years since the Presbyterian Church in Ireland decided to ordain women elders and forty-eight years since it decided to ordain women to the ministry of word and sacrament. Most Protestant denominations have done the same. Whilst opposition to such ordination has a long history, John Calvin, himself, rejected ‘the traditional belief that hierarchy was the basis of all order’³⁴ which, amongst its other consequences, undermined the traditional position that women are subordinate to men. Those who do not subscribe to ‘new Calvinist’ doctrine, to a literal, inerrant, plain reading of the Scriptures, or to a hierarchical understanding of the Trinity are deeply concerned about complementarianism embedded within the structures and systems of PCI and their practical effects.

Women now find themselves in the invidious position whereby PCI Code says one thing but adherents to that Code undermine God’s call to women by promoting complementarianism, by non-attendance and non-participation at services of ordination, and refusal to invite women to preach or teach. It is no surprise, therefore, that fewer and fewer women are entering training for

ministry at Union College (none in recent years) or elected to kirk sessions. There has been no woman Moderator of the General Assembly to date. If congregations are told repeatedly that it is 'unbiblical', or 'unorthodox' to support or undertake women's ordination, then fewer women will proceed to ordination, and decisions at Kirk Session, Presbytery, and General Assembly courts, which might proactively support women as equal rather than subordinate, will become increasingly difficult. A generation of young men and women, and now men and women in their middle years, have been taught, read, and imbibed complementarianism as 'the right way' to be a Christian. The emotional, psychological, and physical toll that this has taken upon women, already in ordained ministry, is devastating. One said to me recently: 'They are just waiting for us to retire or die off'. Another: 'They are polite and even caring in their dealings with me personally, yet they deny the legitimacy of my calling and vote to make decisions on that basis'. If that denial of an aspect of identity, as outlined above, sounds like the denial of calling to baptism, communion, marriage, and ministry for LGBT people, then it may be because complementarianism is now the predominant theological paradigm when it comes to *any matter* related to human sexuality within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

Conclusion

Being presbyterian is difficult for many people in an age of 'new Calvinism.' Like other religious movements 'new Calvinism' is likely to come and go, but the difficulties arising from an ideational system that depends upon a doctrinal approach to identity, a literal, inerrant interpretation of the Scriptures, and complementarianism will remain for many years to come. As I stood beside people in our sanctuary, who were shocked and distressed because of decisions made at the General Assembly in 2018, or listened to women telling me of the emotional, psychological, and spiritual toll 'new Calvinism' has taken upon their lives in 2019, I felt I had woken up in a different church from the one into which I was born and had served most of my life. Over recent years, I have pleaded with people not to step away from the eldership, or to leave our congregation, or denomination, and I have watched as friends and people I have looked up to all my life, have resigned their ministry as clergy, elders, and lay leaders. I have witnessed young people, struggling to make sense of a church which seems at war with itself, opt to worship or serve elsewhere; and I have read letters, heard personal testimony, and listened to LGBT people who have been wounded to the very core of their being by the actions of the church which they regarded as

part of their identity. Being presbyterian in an age of 'new Calvinism' tests our resolve and our faith beyond measure. Perhaps by writing this essay, by highlighting the difficulties as I and other faithful people see them, a conversation may ensue which allows us all to move forward together, in love, as Jesus Christ called us to do.

References

1 Archer, M.; Bhaskar, R.; Collier, T.L.; and Norrie, A. (eds.) 1998. *Critical realism: Essential Readings* Routledge

2 McCracken, S, 2017 *Religion, Identity and Young Adults in East Belfast* PhD Thesis, QUB

3 Hansen, C. 2008 *Young, Restless, Reformed: A journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists*, Crossway

4 www.desirggod.org

5 www.gospelcoalition.org

6 *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, Wayne Grudem and John Piper

7 reformedforum.org

8 The Bible-Mesh Institute affirms the inerrancy and full trustworthiness of the Holy Scriptures and stands in continuity with the Ecumenical Councils of the Christian Church. Bible-Mesh upholds a theological framework as set forth in the following statement from the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (U.K.).

1. There is one God in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
2. God is sovereign in creation, revelation, redemption, and final judgement.
3. The Bible, as originally given, is the inspired and infallible Word of God. It is the supreme authority in all matters of belief and behaviour.
4. Since the fall, the whole of humankind is sinful and guilty, so that everyone is subject to God's wrath and condemnation.
5. The Lord Jesus Christ, God's incarnate Son, is fully God; he was born of a virgin; his humanity is real and sinless; he died on the cross, was raised bodily from death and is now reigning over heaven and earth.
6. Sinful human beings are redeemed from the guilt, penalty, and power of sin only through the sacrificial death once and for all time of their representative and substitute, Jesus Christ, the only mediator between them and God.
7. Those who believe in Christ are pardoned all their sins and accepted in God's sight only because of the righteousness of Christ credited to them; this justification is God's act of undeserved mercy, received solely by trust in him and not by their own efforts.
8. The Holy Spirit alone makes the work of Christ effective to individual sinners, enabling them to turn to God from their sin and to trust in Jesus Christ.
9. The Holy Spirit lives in all those he has regenerated. He makes them increasingly Christlike in character and behaviour and gives them power for their witness in the world.
10. The one holy universal church is the Body of Christ, to which all true believers belong.
11. The Lord Jesus Christ will return in person, to judge everyone, to execute God's just condemnation on those who have not repented and to receive the redeemed to eternal glory.

Popularised by Orthodox Presbyterian Loraine Boettner in *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (P and R Publishing 1990), and

9 English Standard Version Preface p.19

10 Piper, J. 2016 God has People for His Name seven lessons from Europe Article by John Piper, founder, and teacher of desiringGod.org June 25, 2016 www.desiringgod.org

11 Luther, M, Sermons 25:7 LW, vol 10. page 239} in Armstrong, K. 2015 The Bible: The Biography 199

12 Institute III.ii.7

13 McCracken, S. 2017 Religion, Identity and Young Adults in East Belfast PHD Thesis QUB

14 The Code: The Book of the Constitution and Government of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland Published by the Authority of the General Assembly Section III.

15 Armstrong, L. 2015 The Bible: The Biography Armstrong, K. Atlantic Books

16 McGrath, A. ,1990 A Life of John Calvin, page 154

17 McGrath, A. ibid page 257

18 ibid, page 255

19 Tolliday, P. 2007 Just How Plain is the Plain Sense of Scripture'

20 The Code states (Par 31) that 'women shall be eligible for election on the same conditions as men' and this statement must be read to the congregation when an election is to take place (Code Par.177) The ordination of women to the ministry of word and sacrament was agreed by the General Assembly in 1973. The Code states (Par 215): Women shall be eligible for nomination as students for the ministry and for the ordination on the same conditions as men'.

21 Giles, K. 2020 The Headship of Men and the Abuse of Women are they related in any way? Cascade Books 2020

22 Confessional Statement 3. Creation of Humanity Gospelcoalition.org

23 [The Danvers Statement - CBMW](#)

24 Piper, J. and Grudem, J. (eds) Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to evangelical Feminism (Wheaton, IL Crossway 1991), xv.

25 'Complementarians believe that males were designed to shine the spotlight on Christ's relationship to the Church (and the LORD God's relationship to Christ) in a way that females cannot, and that females were designed to shine the spotlight on the church's relationship to Christ (and Christ's relationship to the Lord God) in a way that males cannot' (Complementarianism for Dummies, Mary Kassam).

'Men are called to headship women to submission. The distinctive leadership role within the church given to qualified men is grounded in creation, fall and redemption and must not be

side-lined by appeals to cultural developments.’ (Kevin de Young Danny Akin and Darryl Williamson).

26 Keller, T. 2017 cbmw.org What the New York Times gets wrong about complementarianism April 20, 2017.

27 Grudem, W. Grounds for Divorce: Why I Now Believe There are More than Two Grounds for Divorce cbmw.org 25 June 10, 2020

28 Grudem, W. *ibid*

29 Grudem, W. *ibid*

30 Priscilla Papers Vol. 29, No. 1 Winter 2015).

31 Bouwsma, W.J., 31 John Calvin French Theologian www.britannica.com

32 Giles, K. The Rise and Fall of the Complementarian Doctrine of the Trinity Cascade Books 2017).

33 Bouwsma, W.J., John Calvin French Theologian www.britannica.com

34 ouwsma, W.J. *ibid*

***Footnote:**

Critical Relational Realist understanding of identity.

You may have been born into a presbyterian family or married into one. You may have been drawn into the presbyterian church through Sunday Schools or youth organisations or an evangelical campaign or Union Theological College. You may have joined PCI because it was the most convenient place to worship or, having considered other theological propositions, committed to a covenantal understanding of God. You may have seen it as offering a career opportunity or a means to fulfil a calling to ministry. Maybe it was the church attended by your school friends or partner or the church that made you feel most welcome. Maybe you heard a presbyterian preacher or youth leader speaking and were convinced that God loved you so much that he sent his Son Jesus Christ into the world so that you might be saved. Whatever your story, it will involve a set of relationships between pre-existing structures, your human agency and the cultural ideas and systems from which (you) being presbyterian has emerged.

This relational understanding of how we come to be presbyterian can be described as a SAC. This SAC comprises complex morphogenetic relationships between preceding *structures (S)* including family, school, university, work, and religious institutions; *human agency (A)*, a complex relationality between consciousness, selfhood, personal identity, and social identity; and *culture (C)*, the universal corpus of ideas and knowledge (in my case {significantly but not exclusively} reformed and reforming as accessed through the Presbyterian Church in Ireland) and their effects. The reflexive part of us, the ‘I’ that ruminates and converses with ourselves internally continues as part of this relationality so that ‘being presbyterian’ is something that we may mull over and re-evaluate. Being presbyterian may or may not matter to you. It may

be a concern, part of your personal identity, evidenced in the roles and tasks that constitute your social identity.

Refocusing on the relationships from which being presbyterian emerges highlights the way we understand reality. Reality may be understood in terms of the natural order – our bodies and physical wellbeing; the practical order – what we do and achieve; the social order – where tasks, roles and associated self-worth are in play; and the transcendent order – where we experience God in our lives, in history, and in ourselves^a. That means that ‘being presbyterian’ includes an embodied relationship with God, immanent and transcendent, incarnate in Jesus Christ - God whose essence is love and whose purpose has always been to be in relationship with us humans (according to scripture and some theologians. Through our relationships with the transcendent, we experience God in the wonders of creation, God presence in times of joy and despair, and God working for good through the lives and activities of other people. When we participate in worship services, or prayer, or activities from which emerge forgiveness, justice, or love, we experience God to be real. When we access pre-existing theological knowledge that withstands critical evaluation, we understand God to be real. When we love and are loved by other people, we realise that God is with us. When we look to Jesus Christ, the peace of God that ‘surpasses all understanding’ fills our hearts and minds. Such experiences, to which the scriptures testify repeatedly, are the grounds from which our faith emerges, and those grounds are essentially relational. Sociologically and theologically, it may be argued, therefore, that experience is inherent to a life of faith, to what it is to be human and to relationships understood at many levels. Experience cannot be bracketed out of Christianity or out of ‘being presbyterian’ within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

What might this mean in practical terms? Firstly, recognition of the complex relational nature of being presbyterian. Each of us has our own embodied relationship with the reality into which we have been born so ‘being presbyterian’ will be different for each one of us. Secondly, embrace these differences as something to be explored and enjoyed not feared or overcome within the church, and through our relationships with other denominations and religious traditions. Thirdly, broaden our understanding of what it means to ‘be presbyterian’ beyond adherence to doctrine. Faith involves an embodied experience of God and all human knowledge is corrigible. Faith, therefore, cannot be reduced to adherence to a particular set of ideas or doctrine.

- a. Archer, M.; Collier, A.; Porpora, D. (2004) *Transcendence: Critical Realism and God* Routledge.