

THE CRESSSET

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Liberating Reformed Tradition

The Challenge of Christian Vocation
in a Twenty-First Century World

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Ask a Reformed person to talk about tradition, and their first response probably will be a blank stare. As a cradle Calvinist, I was taught that tradition was basically an add-on. Tradition was that endless adiaphora of scholastic speculation and papal pronouncements that the medieval Church had piled onto the simple honest truths of the Bible. We, the true heirs of John Calvin and his iconoclastic followers in Geneva, Scotland, the Netherlands, and Massachusetts Bay, preferred our religion straight up and unadorned, dispensed directly from the word of God itself.

Reformed worship, architecture, and spirituality became notoriously spare and plain. I am often asked at the Congregational Library for an old “order of worship” or “communion service” so that present-day heirs of the Puritans can put on an historically-accurate Sunday program. But of course, these were people who constitutionally despised set forms and written rules. They left behind a lot of paper, but not much of the kind that my callers are looking for. Within the Reformed churches more generally, anything that smacked of ritual or, even worse, a rule imposed by some external authority became anathema. Church sanctuaries avoided all representations of God, the communion elements grew smaller and smaller, and the Bible on that large central pulpit loomed ever larger.

But of course, most sensible Reformed Christians recognize that they do indeed have a “tradition.” There is no such thing as a faith based on the Bible only. All Protestants recognize the Bible as their central authority, but they also realize that it always comes within an interpretive framework. Especially in those churches that originated in the Calvinist wing of the Protestant Reformation—the Dutch, German, and Hungarian Reformed, the New England Congregationalists, the Scotch Covenanters, and Presbyterians of many hues and stripes—the “tradition” really means the

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Christian story as it has been summarized and systematized in a variety of creeds, confessions, and catechisms.

These avowedly human documents were never meant to replace the Scriptures and were not regarded as “inspired” in any particular way, but they were certainly central to the way the faith was passed down from one generation to the next. Scholars and churchmen endured the laborious process of grinding out confessions and creeds in order to enable ordinary church people to understand the Bible’s essential teachings. The Fifty-Two Lord’s days of the Heidelberg Catechism created an ordered framework for weekly proclamation of the Word in the context of corporate worship. The many shorter catechisms written by Calvinist reformers offered a trustworthy rubric for parents to teach the faith to their children at home (Ozment 1983, 132–77).

Though not all branches of the Reformed family share the same enthusiasm for standardized formats, these documents have long provided them with a readily definable intellectual framework. Being Reformed, however various emphases are defined, means dealing at some level with the catechetical structure of the faith. As a former Calvinette, graduate of a Christian elementary school, and non-voluntary participant in many a Sunday afternoon study of the Heidelberg Catechism, I easily can attest to the Reformed affinity for didacticism. Now an adult Congregationalist, in a faith community historically averse to proscribed creeds of any kind, I catch only fleeting glimpses of the Calvinist certainties I once (partially) memorized. But in either case, confessions and catechisms present Reformed tradition as a definable and relatively stable body of content, in most respects shared with the larger body of Christ across time and space. They are meant to provide both a specific identification and a series of ecumenical touchstones.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given this somewhat austere approach to tradition, Reformed churches have a well-earned reputation for traditionalism, an aversion to change for change’s sake alone. Some of this conservatism is simply built into their theological DNA. Anyone familiar with Calvinist doctrine certainly knows something of its famously taut intellectual structure: the so-called “five points of Calvinism,” the tripartite questions and answers of the Heidelberg Catechism, the measured paragraphs of the Westminster Confession, and the solemn affirmations of the Canons of Dordt. These are not documents that invite nitpicking by amateurs. Large and weighty doctrines like “total depravity” and “divine sovereignty” do not stand alone for critical inspection but fit together like interlocking pieces in an arch. If you are going to have a God who is completely sovereign over all of creation, you logically have to take some form of election and irresistible grace as well. God cannot be all knowing and all powerful while a sinner sits around and ponders his options. In theory at least, there is no such thing as a “cafeteria Calvinist.”

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But as is true of many other Protestant bodies—and most religions everywhere—Reformed writers also recognize that tradition is more than just static doctrine contained by ink and paper. It also describes a long, complex, and continually evolving conversation about those seventeenth-century confessions and catechisms. It is the work of a church both reformed and reforming, to use the famous phrase. In a fundamental sense, tradition is both a noun and a verb, defining not just a body of doctrine, but the ongoing work of Christian people dead, alive, and yet to be born. Tradition thus requires a living, breathing community of people who recognize it as genuine revelation. Imagine, says theologian John Leith, that a holocaust of some sort had wiped out all traces of the Christian community, and then that someone walked through the ruins and found the Bible in a sealed box. The chances of that Bible alone giving rise to a new Christian community would be, in Leith's words, "very small or nonexistent" (Leith 1977, 17–19). Tradition, in other words, has a social history. It is not simply a common body of information that people inherit, but a common ground from which they can ask each other interesting questions.

Of course, that social history of Reformed tradition is not necessarily a pretty story. For all their famed iconoclasm, Calvin's heirs have not been shy about imagining what their tradition might look like in earthly form. In the early decades of the Reformation, Calvin's achievement was to take the spare, existential piety of Luther and frame it into an aggressive social program. Philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff has described "original Calvinism" as "a passionate desire to reshape the social world so that it no longer would be alienated from God" (Wolterstorff 1983, 21). Those basic principles of Calvinist theology, that the world was fallen but God remained sovereign, and that believers were to be God's agents of creation renewal, spurred some fantastic new visions of cities on a hill. They propelled people across oceans and continents, and launched a continuous stream of armies of soldiers, missionaries, and merchants (see, for example, Benedict 2002).

Perhaps not surprisingly, not everyone was thrilled with the project. Soaringly spiritual and powerfully earthbound, early Reformed thought demanded that the world be remade, and that theology take institutional form, as it did for good or ill, periodically wreaking havoc on the unjust or unwary. Wolterstorff aptly described "that most insufferable of all human beings, the triumphalist Calvinist, the one who believes that the revolution instituting the holy commonwealth has already occurred and that his or her task is now simply to keep it in place" (Wolterstorff 1983, 21).

In some quarters, therefore, references to Reformed "tradition" carry a powerfully negative subtext. As George Marsden writes, the "greatest fault" of American Reformed communities has been a tendency toward "elitism," assuming that "Reformed people have been endowed with superior theological, spiritual, or moral

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merit by God himself” (Marsden 1985, 11). In worst cases, the Reformed social program becomes an instrument of oppression. South African critic John de Gruchy writes of the “fundamental ambiguity in the Reformed tradition, its evangelical and transformative witness on the one hand, and its dominating imperialism on the other” (de Gruchy 1991, 19). Though there is no direct link between Calvinism and apartheid, a mythic reading of the Dutch Reformed community in South Africa as God’s chosen people was a bad idea with an obvious social consequence.

The Reformed story offers an opportunity to name some of the starker issues about tradition—both the intellectual creativity it generates and the tendency toward coercion. Being faithful to tradition in a Reformed setting certainly has an ambiguous subtext. On the one hand, tradition is a moving theological target, a series of confessions constantly being redefined by a community of believers. It draws off an expansive view of Christian vocation in a world over which God is involved at every level. What could be more inviting to a scholar and an educator? Yet Reformed tradition also has a strong didactic undertow, in which truth becomes a series of propositions that can be memorized and taught. It has been mediated all too often by an inward-facing community with a tendency to identify itself as God’s specially chosen people. What could be more daunting to honest intellectual searching?

Yet it is just these built-in forms of resistance to modernity and simultaneous embrace of modern culture that make Reformed institutions such interesting—and often frustrating—places to work. What follows, then, is an attempt to describe some of that ambiguity, acknowledging ways in which tradition operates both to liberate and to confine, and then some thoughts about the peculiar opportunities and challenges that modernity presents within a Reformed context.

Freedom in Tradition

Here is one good thing right off the bat: the Reformed dynamic is not, in its essential sense, moralistic. Reformed theology speaks less of “sins” as individual acts of transgression and more of “sin,” Augustine’s great existential category of human alienation from God. Thus, a regularly updated inventory of personal wrongdoing is not technically possible, as the problem is far more extensive than any single person could enumerate. Total depravity is a doctrine of width more than depth, more comprehensive than simply cumulative.

Reformed confessionalism also means that the believer’s public affirmation of faith is technically enough for admittance to membership—or at least that it is more fundamentally important than an emotional experience of conversion. Certainly, over the years this notion has been eroded, especially as Reformed thought has commingled with American evangelical piety (“ideal types” simply do not exist). But within a strict

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Reformed understanding, signing your name to a seventeenth-century confession, as I did upon becoming a faculty member of Calvin College, is not primarily a statement of one's individual beliefs. Rather, it is a signal of membership in a larger Christian community, a statement of final loyalty.

Moreover, Reformed communities recognize that confessions are always subject to revision and reinterpretation, that they have “only a provisional, temporary, relative authority” (Presbyterian Church (USA) 1992, 25). They are, as we have seen, “talking points” for further discussion, not orthodoxy frozen for all future time. Thus Calvin College's book of signatures includes a few points of exception, particularly those of faculty who did not wish to go on record as despising the errors of the Anabaptists, as the Belgic Confession would have them do.

In a practical sense, this means that Reformed thinkers can enjoy a fairly broad intellectual freedom. Once you have affirmed the standard outlines of the faith, your loyalty should be forever above suspicion. In a best-case scenario, a teacher in a publicly-identified Reformed institution does not need to provide a spiritual x-ray of any heart-felt emotion. Behavioral standards are not insignificant, but they are not primary. So it is not beyond the pale to ask uncomfortable questions—questions that might not even occur to a scoffing unbeliever—and to expect an honest discussion. Theoretically at least, Reformed confessionalism creates ample ground for an articulate and free “loyal opposition.”

This implied permission for critical questions also grows out of the Reformed emphasis on God's sovereignty over creation. Abraham Kuyper, the turn-of-the-century Dutch Prime Minister and patron saint of what is commonly known as neo-Calvinism, once famously declared the need for Christians to claim “every inch” of creation for God (Kuyper 1998, 488). In practical terms, this meant that no subject area, however mundane, was off the table for intellectual exploration. Kuyper believed that all ideas were inter-related, and at bottom, a function of one's particular world and life view. In his view, there were no strictly secular or religious areas of study. Though no postmodernist, he understood truth as perspectival—all statements of “fact” were traceable to a particular set of theological commitments. Taking Calvin's capacious idea of Christian vocation to the next level, Kuyper laid a foundation for complex, long-term intellectual work, proceeding not by theoretical mile-long leaps, but by a leisurely, painstaking march of tiny inches.

Calvin and Kuyper's idea of Christian transformation meant that it was necessary to take the created order seriously. The world was important because it emphatically belonged to God, who eagerly awaited the searching exploration of busy, curious people. It was far more than a mere backdrop to the ultimate drama of salvation. Indeed, Reformed theology requires attentiveness to context. The complex interplay of divine

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will and human agency raises all kinds of good questions about the “constructedness” of our earthly reality, and the true proportions of our role in the world. History, as James Bratt has described it, is a kind of rising, densely-woven double-helix in which it might be possible to tease out what is “Christian” but wrong to extract it entirely (Bratt 1998, 166).

In Reformed communities, this implied respect for the details of God’s creation lies behind some formidable skills in institution-building. Examples abound, from Calvin’s Geneva to the ordered villages of Massachusetts Bay, from Harvard and Yale to the myriad of smaller denominational colleges and institutes established across the United States in the nineteenth century. There are some concrete theological reasons behind their famous passion for doing “all things decently and in order”—real live things matter. But this means more in scholarly terms than just having the xerox machines run on time. Respect for institutions, for something bigger and more important than ourselves, is not historically strong in American Protestantism and certainly not within the individualistic milieu of American culture. At its best, the Reformed propensity toward building schools and churches is an acknowledgement that the work of other people is as important, maybe even more important, than the work of a single person. And again, at its best, this implicit awareness has generated resistance to the individualism of modern life, the tendency to see our lives as endless projects of self-creation.

Thus in this sense, Reformed tradition has often been a platform for creative, useful thinking, offering a rich vocabulary of common references and providing a powerful solvent to the acids of modernity. A Christian scholar can walk pretty far out on an intellectual limb because that branch is firmly connected to a strong supporting tree trunk and held down by deep roots, tested by winds from every direction. Historian Jaroslav Pelikan puts this idea into a musical metaphor, arguing that tradition provides the “perennial themes and key metaphors” for creative expression. As every musician knows, it is the discipline of repeated practice that lifts us beyond the “banality and trivialization” of a “total immersion in the here and now.” Tradition, in other words, allows us to be genuinely innovative without being merely unintelligible (Pelikan 1984, 78).

Freedom from Tradition

But of course, the real question is, what does tradition look like in my 8:00 AM freshman history class? What happens when these dynamic, exciting ideas meet the mind of a sleepy, restless eighteen-year old—in my experience some of the most intellectually conservative people in the world? Can one of those fortunate few, raised by attentive parents, nurtured by a theologically-literate congregation, and often educated within a Christian school system, ask authentic, interesting questions? Ancient

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Greeks, African tribesmen, Asiatic nomads, and all of those people across time and space who knew nothing of Abraham Kuyper's world and life view—what could they possibly mean to a kid from Hudsonville, Michigan, far too early on a dark and cold winter morning?

I worry sometimes that the very cogency of the Reformed world and life view obscures rather than illuminates the outside world. Even the specific literary forms used to organize Reformed teaching subtly discourage open-ended questioning. Every existential question posed by the Heidelberg Catechism—why are we here and what is our purpose?—has at most a paragraph of response. The compact, simple format itself suggests there are no other answers to be found.

Indeed, even that famed intellectualism of Reformed communities can retard the kind of painful questioning that moves tradition forward. The more smoothly and comprehensively the system works, the easier it becomes to engage in self-referential conversations with people who know your vocabulary, and who will not, in the end, raise any questions that the two of you cannot answer. Specifically Christian scholarship all too easily becomes a game for insiders, not a path into any seriously dark night of the soul.

And, finally, that very embeddedness of Reformed thinking and its attention toward context can suggest that “what is” is “what we have made,” and thus it is “what should be.” We lose important critical distance between, say, American middle-class values and the demands of Holy Writ. Or, in an even worse case, divine providence is secularized into manifest destiny. God's will becomes a blanket justification for an aggressive nationalistic program. These are certainly not uniquely Reformed sins, but, I would argue, a peculiar set of theologically-driven Reformed temptations.

Liberating Reformed Tradition

So how can we be faithful within and to a Reformed tradition—or any other for that matter—under the rising barometric pressure of modernity? Is it necessary to batten down the hatches, hammer down those creeds and confessions, and hope for the sunrise? Or should we simply give in to that long slow trickle of relativism that promises eventually to overwhelm us all?

That dualism is, of course, impossible and unnecessary. There is no authentic position “outside” of modern culture. We cannot reject it any more than we can reject light or air. And why would we? Modernity has taught Christians important lessons about human rights and tolerance, reminding them that the Bible does not condone slavery or require the subjection of women. As Mark Schwehn and Dorothy Bass have commented, paraphrasing Alfred North Whitehead, it is necessary to “seek [the] Enlightenment and then distrust it” (Schwehn and Bass 1995, 295).

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Nor is relativism really the problem. For many religious communities, and perhaps especially Reformed people, the real challenge of modern culture is its fragmentation. It is now technologically possible to select all of one's news, entertainment, political debates, even food choices and never have to encounter an opposing point of view—computers, cell phones, and cable television allow us to live quite comfortably in self-constructed little bubbles. The consequences for religious bodies are considerable. Especially in groups with a strong “chosen people” ideology, the issue is not so much maintaining a stable body of doctrine, but resisting the drift toward sectarianism.

One of the great moments in Dutch-American cinema is the scene in Paul Schrader's underrated film “Hard Core,” in which Michigan onion farmer Jake Van Dorn tries to explain the five points of Calvinism to a Las Vegas prostitute. The two are sitting together in the airport, both in search of Jake's daughter, who has gone missing from a Young Calvinist Convention (yes, there once were such things) on the West Coast. It is a difficult conversation. To a self-proclaimed “Venusian,” Calvinism looks downright bizarre. Even Jake has to admit that the “TULIP” acronym makes a bit more sense on his front porch in Hudsonville than it does in the Las Vegas airport. Needless to say, he does not win her to the Reformed world and life view (Mouw 2004).

A tradition that is truly worth perpetuating should propel us energetically into the world, but not like the Calvinist crusaders of old. It is no longer possible to imagine “the world” as neutral territory waiting to be claimed and reconfigured by God's providentially chosen people. Over the last four centuries, people in the West have slowly begun to understand that the entire planet is already inhabited by other people. Our new pluralistic awareness demands new ways of establishing righteous communities that are not simply walled off to keep out the unelect, but full of light and air.

The image that appeals most to me in this respect is the ethnic neighborhood, especially as it emerged among turn-of-the-century immigrants to the United States. For all the negative stereotypes, those were vital, culturally porous places, where newcomers quickly learned “the ropes” of American culture, but not at the cost of their original identity. At the end of the day, you could always go home and talk about what was really important in a familiar language that allowed you to express your deepest thoughts and feelings. Religious people today have a similar opportunity to learn to think in two languages—not just their particular tongue of Zion, but also the idiom of our surrounding culture. Most of us probably always will carry a particular accent from the old country, but that is no reason why we cannot try to speak in ways that others can understand and find compelling.

In this respect, the pluralism of modern culture is a gift, offering meaningful, invigorating conversation partners to even the closest-knit covenanted communities. Since my Calvinette days, I've learned a lot from sojourns among evangelicals, mainliners,

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Baptists, Episcopalians, Catholics, and charismatics. From each one, I learned something new and important about my Christian identity. But I spent some of my best times among Mennonites, and I am convinced that there is something special that happens when Calvinists and Anabaptists start talking to each other—when those who have so long considered themselves to be the “custodians” of American culture meet up with people who have long viewed that culture with theological suspicion. Indeed, as Richard Mouw suggests, much of the historic antipathy between the two is based on similarity, not difference. He argues that Anabaptist theology is really a “radicalization” of the Calvinist social vision (Mouw 2001, 22). And in fact, Reformed communities need to be reminded that sometimes “what is” should not be. They need to listen to the Anabaptist critique of American capitalism and accept the dare to be prophetic, maybe even unpopular. Anabaptists can learn a lot from Reformed people too, and in conversation these two traditions have much in common with which they can explore the paradoxes of being both “in and not of” the modern world.

But not all conversation partners need be religious. Our pluralistic world both demands and facilitates a deeper appreciation for the old and often unappreciated Reformed doctrine of common grace, the idea that God bestows favors not only onto a chosen people, but blesses the world through any means that God so chooses. This has been a controversial notion among Reformed folks. How do you reconcile the doctrines of total depravity and common grace? Is it really “grace”? Is it special revelation? But stated carefully, common grace does not simply baptize the standing order. It asks us to see and appreciate God’s work in unlikely places, that is, outside the immediate control of God’s chosen people—handicapped bathrooms, government programs to fight AIDS and malaria in third world countries, even a well-crafted, thoughtful television program. Common grace insists that Reformed people see themselves as emphatically human and in authentic solidarity with all the other inhabitants of planet earth.

There are many ways to measure the value of tradition, but in the end, it simply has to make a difference in the world. It has to have a transformative ethical impact on the people who hold it, and it has to make the world a better place. Thus Reformed tradition does not exist just to make Reformed people happier and more smugly aware of their distinctiveness.

It can, and probably should, make them a little bit weird. During the 1950s, a decade devoted to Protestant healthy-mindedness, Martin Luther King once commented that the American ideal of being happy and well-adjusted was terribly overrated. We should never “adjust ourselves,” he said, to a fallen, unjust world. “I call upon you to be maladjusted,” King declared in one of his most memorable speeches, “for it may be that the salvation of the world lies in the hands of the maladjusted” (King 1958, 36). The imperative of tradition today is to live gracefully in the world, maintaining balance

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with a light touch. That is not easy for Reformed Christians, who value things done decently and in good order, and who have often envisioned Christian vocation as a kind of godly conquest, but it is hard to imagine a good alternative. A liberated Reformed tradition should be, in the end, liberating for all people. †

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