



Machen's Warrior Children

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Abstract

From 1923 to the present, the movement begun by J. Gresham Machen and Westminster Theological Seminary has supplied the theological leadership for the conservative evangelical Reformed Christians in the United States. Under that leadership, conservative Calvinists made a strong stand against liberal theology. But having lost that theological battle in the Presbyterian Church, U. S. A., they turned inward to battle among themselves about issues less important—in some cases, far less important—than liberalism. This essay describes 21 of these issues, with some subdivisions, and offers some brief analysis and evaluations. It concludes by raising some questions for the Reformed community to consider: Was it right to devote so much of the church's time and effort to these theological battles? Did the disputants follow biblical standards for resolution of these issues? Was the quality of thought in these polemics worthy of the Reformed tradition of scholarship? Should the Reformed community be willing to become more inclusive, to tolerate greater theological differences than many of the polemicists have wanted?

Orientation

J. Gresham Machen, a lifelong bachelor, left no biological children but many spiritual ones. The story of American conservative evangelical Reformed theology [\[1\]](http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/2003Machen.htm) in the twentieth century is largely the story of those children.

Machen (1881-1937) took degrees at Johns Hopkins University and Princeton Theological Seminary, then studied for a time in Germany. He returned to teach New Testament at Princeton Seminary. His faith and theological stability had been somewhat shaken by his experience with liberal German Bible critics and theologians, particularly Wilhelm Herrmann. But in time he became a vigorous and cogent defender of the confessional Presbyterianism taught at Princeton by such stalwarts as Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, and Geerhardus Vos. In *The Virgin Birth of Christ* [2] and *The Origin of Paul's Religion*, [3] he attacked (mostly German) critics of Scripture, arguing the historical authenticity of the New Testament. In 1923, he published *Christianity and Liberalism*, [4] an attack on the liberal or modernist theology espoused by those critics and by many in American churches. This book argued, not only that liberalism was wrong, but that it was a different religion from Christianity. According to Machen, Christianity and liberalism were antithetically opposed in their concepts of doctrine, God and man, the Bible, Christ, salvation, and the church. The liberals taught that doctrine is secondary to experience, that God is father to all apart from redemption, that the Bible is a book of mere human testimonies, that Christ is merely a moral example, that salvation is to be found by following that example, and that the church should accept this liberal gospel as orthodox.

Princeton Seminary was under the authority of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, U. S. A. (henceforth PCUSA). In 1928, that body determined to reorganize the seminary to make it represent a broad range of opinion in the church, including the liberalism against which Machen had written. In response, Machen left the seminary, together with colleagues Robert D. Wilson and Oswald T. Allis. These scholars founded Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and added to its faculty such younger men as R. B. Kuiper, Ned B. Stonehouse, Allan A. MacRae, Paul Woolley, Cornelius Van Til, and John Murray. Machen intended that Westminster would continue the confessional Presbyterian tradition of what would then be called "Old" Princeton.

In 1936, Machen left the PCUSA after the denomination suspended him from the ministry for his involvement in the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions. Machen and others had created that Board to send out missionaries that could be trusted to preach the biblical gospel without any compromise with liberalism. Rather than accepting his suspension, Machen founded a new denomination, known first as the Presbyterian Church of America, later renamed the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (henceforth, OPC).

Machen's movement represented numerically only a small proportion of Reformed believers in the US. Many conservative Reformed people remained in the PCUSA. Many belonged to older, smaller denominations, such as the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA) and Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARP) that descended from the Scottish Covenants. There

is also a major wing of American Calvinism with Dutch roots. The Reformed Church in America (RCA) goes back to the founding of New Amsterdam (later New York) in 1626. The Christian Reformed Church (CRC) originated in a split from the RCA in 1822 and retained a more conservative stance than that body through much of the period since that time. In the last forty years, however, it has been troubled by debates over biblical inerrancy, women's ordination, and homosexuality, leading many of its more conservative members to leave and form other denominations such as the Orthodox Christian Reformed Church (OCRC) and the United Reformed Church (URC). These Scottish and Dutch groups, together with the conservatives in the PCUSA, respected what Machen and Westminster were doing, though they also supported their own denominational seminaries.

A small Reformed denomination of German background, the Reformed Church in the U. S. (RCUS) used Westminster for many years as the main institution for training its pastoral candidates.

There are also in the US a number of people with Reformed convictions in Congregational, Independent, and Anglican churches (both the large Protestant Episcopal Church and smaller bodies like the Reformed Episcopal Church). Many Baptists also embrace Reformed soteriology, with, of course, differing levels of appreciation for traditional Reformed views of covenant and church government. Some students from these traditions attended Westminster, and the seminary had some influence within these communities.

In 1973 there was a split in the Presbyterian Church U. S. (PCUS), the southern counterpart of the PCUSA from which Machen departed, essentially for the same reason as the Machen split: opposition to liberal theology. Many of those who left the PCUS formed the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). [\[5\]](#)

Machen's movement did not represent all of these elements of Reformed Christianity, but it had a major influence on all of them. Indeed it can be argued that it provided their theological leadership. Machen himself made an effort to bring together American, Scottish, and Dutch traditions at Westminster. The original faculty included R. B. Kuiper, Ned Stonehouse, and Cornelius Van Til, all of whom were raised in the CRC. Another major influence on the seminary was biblical theologian Geerhardus Vos, another Dutchman from the CRC who taught at Princeton and remained there after 1929, though he had strong sympathies with Westminster. The Scots were also represented on the early faculty by systematic theologian John Murray, who maintained his British citizenship, though he taught in America until his retirement in 1967. Murray held to some of the distinctives (such as the exclusive use of Psalm versions in worship) of the groups in America influenced by Scottish covenanters, such as the RPCNA, though he himself was a minister in the OPC.

There was also theological diversity in Machen's movement, which I believe he cultivated intentionally. Allan A. Macrae of the Westminster faculty was premillennial, later serving as an editor of the *New Scofield Reference Bible* (1967) a major work of dispensational theology. Paul Woolley

was also premillennial, but without dispensationalist sympathies. Machen himself was postmillennial, which was the majority position on the Old Princeton faculty. The rest of the Westminster faculty was amillennial, so far as I can tell, though John Murray leaned in a postmillennial direction in later years. Other premillennialists served with Machen on the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions. The premillennialists served as a link between Machen's confessional Presbyterianism and the broader currents of American evangelicalism.

This diversity, both ethnic and doctrinal, brought many influences to bear on Westminster and the OPC. It also helped Westminster to have significant influence upon many Reformed bodies and upon American evangelicalism generally. Old Princeton had already been regarded by many evangelicals as their theological leader. Even many non-Calvinists looked to the writings of Princeton professors B. B. Warfield, Robert Dick Wilson, and Machen himself, for scholarly defenses of biblical authority and inerrancy. Lewis Sperry Chafer, president of Dallas Theological Seminary, corresponded with Machen urging closer ties between the two seminaries (a desire that Machen did not reciprocate). Westminster also had a major influence upon the conservative wing of the CRC (and later the OCRC and URC), upon the Reformed Episcopal Church, among the Scottish bodies like the RPCNA, upon the PCA, and upon individuals and churches of Reformed Baptist persuasion.

Westminster graduates taught at seminaries such as Covenant, Gordon-Conwell, Trinity, Biblical, Mid-America, and Reformed Episcopal. When Fuller Theological Seminary was organized in 1947 it used at first a curriculum very much like that of Westminster, and several Westminster graduates served on the early faculty. Reformed Theological Seminary, founded in Jackson Mississippi in 1966, now with three campuses and numerous extension centers, readily acknowledges a large debt to Westminster, in curriculum, theological emphasis, and faculty.

Westminster faculty and graduates have continued to provide leadership to the Reformed theological world. I believe it can be said that although Machen's Westminster was not a large seminary it was one of the most important influences, perhaps the most important institutional influence, upon conservative Reformed theology in the twentieth century.

Machen died of pneumonia in 1937, disappointed that his new denomination was already showing signs of division. Machen's children were theological battlers, and, when the battle against

liberalism in the PCUSA appeared to be over, they found other theological battles to fight. Up to the present time, these and other battles have continued within the movement, and, in my judgment, that is the story of conservative evangelical Reformed theology in twentieth-century America. In the rest of this essay I will discuss that theological warfare, distinguishing 21 areas of debate.

1. Eschatology

The first theological battle in Machen's new denomination concerned the order of events in the last days, particularly the nature of the millennium, the thousand year period mentioned in Rev. 20:4-6. Classic premillennialists, following some of the early Church Fathers, teach that the return of Christ will precede a thousand years of peace in which Christ would reign upon the earth. Dispensational premillennialists hold that Christ's return will be in two stages: (1) secretly to rapture his saints, leaving all others behind, and (2) publicly, after seven years of tribulation, to institute his visible millennial reign. They also teach that during the millennium God will literally fulfill his promises to Israel, promises not given to Gentile believers. Amillennialists believe that the thousand years of Revelation 20 is a figurative number, indicating the whole period between Jesus' Resurrection and his Return, in which Christ rules from heaven and brings people to know peace with God through the preaching of the Gospel.

In December, 1935, John Murray began in *The Presbyterian Guardian*, then the organ of the Machen movement, a series of articles called "The Reformed Faith and Modern Substitutes." These articles attacked dispensational premillennialism, as well as modernism and Arminianism, as heresy. They offended a number of people in the Machen movement who either (1) sympathized with dispensational theology, (2) were unable to regard it as heresy, or (3) who thought the debate about dispensationalism could lead to an attack upon non-dispensational premillennialists. This issue, together with the next to be mentioned, led to a split within the Machen movement, producing after Machen's death yet another new seminary (Faith Theological Seminary) and another new denomination (the Bible Presbyterian Church, BPC), which revised the Westminster Confession of Faith to make it premillennial.

Debate over eschatology has continued since that time among conservative American Calvinists. In 1957, Loraine Boettner's *The Millennium* [\[6\]](#) appeared, renewing discussion of the

postmillennial position, which had been relatively unpopular in Reformed circles since the days of Old Princeton. Postmillennialists today usually agree with amillennialists that the thousand years of Rev. 20 designates the age between the Resurrection and the Return of Jesus. But they emphasize that during this period, or toward the end of it, the Gospel will triumph, not only in bringing individuals to salvation, but also in dominating culture. In the 1960s and 70s, postmillennialism became the dominant view of the Christian Reconstruction movement, led by R. J. Rushdoony, Gary North, and Greg L. Bahnsen. The Reconstructionists argued that amillennialism and premillennialism, since they were pessimistic about the possibility of Christian cultural dominance, bore significant responsibility for the modern decline of Christian influence in society. [7]

Postmillennialists tend to hold preterist interpretations of many biblical texts dealing with the “last days” such as Jesus’ Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24, Mark 13, Luke 21) and the Book of Revelation. [8] Preterism holds that many (or, in an extreme form of preterism, all) of the events predicted in these passages have already taken place, in the “coming” of God to judge Israel, resulting in the destruction of the temple in 70 A. D. Recently, preterists (some affiliated with the Christian Reconstruction Movement, some not) have become very active, forming organizations, holding conferences, producing literature. [9] The extreme form of preterism, sometimes called “full” preterism, denies that Scripture promises a coming of Christ that is future to us.

In my judgment and that of many others, extreme preterism is unorthodox. But partisans of the other eschatological views have exaggerated the importance of adopting one such position over another. It is not evident that Scripture is precise enough in this area to decisively establish one of these as the truth, let alone as a test of orthodoxy. And, contrary to the Reconstructionist postmillennialists, I think that eschatological positions have had very little to do with the cultural pessimism or optimism of their proponents. Many of the most politically active Christians in the US have been premillennialists (Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson) or amillennialists (James Skillen, the Association for Public Justice), contrary to the postmillennialist claim that these positions foster cultural irrelevance and impotence. For many Christians, biblical admonitions to seek justice in society are sufficient reason to become culturally and politically active, and these are far more weighty than the supposed implications of any eschatological view.

By the 1970s, for the most part “eschatological liberty” prevailed in most American Reformed

denominations. Even the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod (RPES), an offshoot of the BPC, which maintained the premillennial revisions to the Westminster Confession, came to hold that all three major positions could be tolerated in the church. But this developing consensus was not sufficient to erase the effects of the breach of 1937, which is still reflected in the denominational alignments.

2. Christian Liberty

The other main issue that divided the OPC in 1937 was the issue of whether Christians should totally abstain from alcoholic beverages. Machen held that Scripture permitted moderate use of alcohol. Others in the Machen movement, however, held that the use of alcohol had produced so many evils in the modern world (such as destruction of individual lives, destruction of families, auto injuries and deaths) that conscientious Christians had no option but total abstinence. The moderationist position was the majority view of the Reformed tradition, abstinence the majority view of broader American evangelicalism, which had supported the prohibitionist amendment to the US Constitution. To the moderationists, the abstainers violated the principle of *sola Scriptura*, elevating a cultural prejudice to the status of doctrine. To the abstainers, the advocates of moderation were refusing to apply broader Scriptural principles to a major social evil.

My impression is that the moderationists have pretty much won the day, although even now many American Reformed churches (usually in deference to recovering alcoholics) use unfermented grape juice in the Lord's Supper. One rarely hears the arguments for abstinence any more in Reformed circles, though the discussion continues in other forms of American evangelicalism.

3. The Incomprehensibility of God

From around 1944 to 1948, the OPC was troubled by a controversy between followers of Cornelius Van Til, Westminster's Professor of Apologetics, and those of Gordon H. Clark, Professor of Philosophy at Wheaton College, later at Butler University and Covenant College. The Presbytery of Philadelphia of the OPC ordained Clark to the ministry in 1944, but followers of Van Til complained against his ordination. Several issues entered this controversy, the main one described as the issue of the "incomprehensibility of God." Both sides agreed, of course, that God was

incomprehensible to human beings. But they disagreed on the relation of God's thoughts to man's thoughts. [\[10\]](#) To Van Til, when God thinks "this is a rose," the "contents" of his thought are "qualitatively different" from the contents of any human mind thinking "this is a rose." To Clark, the contents of God's thought and a human being's in this case are identical: both God and man are having the same thought. Van Til was trying to guard the creator-creature distinction by saying that just as God radically differs from man, so the contents of God's mind radically differ from the contents of man's mind. Clark was trying to avoid skepticism: for if God's thought is true, and human thought necessarily differs from it in every respect, then human thought cannot be true.

The debate was vigorous and voluminous. The key terms "contents" and "qualitative difference" were never very well defined, and the two parties regularly talked past one another. I think that in this discussion personal issues impeded conceptual clarity. And we must ask, to what degree of precision may theologians seek to define the incomprehensibility of God without violating that very incomprehensibility?

As I see it, however, Van Til, though he sometimes expressed his view in confusing language, did not deny what was most important to Clark, namely that God and man can believe the same proposition and thus can agree as to what is objectively true. Similarly, Clark expressed, in his discussion of the "mode" of God's knowledge, what was important to Van Til, namely the radical difference between the nature and workings the divine mind and the human.

The result of the controversy was that the General Assembly of the OPC did not revoke Clark's ordination, but Clark himself and many of his disciples left the denomination later over issues related to the controversy. Another battle, another split. [\[11\]](#)

4. Apologetics

Clark and Van Til battled over epistemology and therefore also over how people come to know God. Both men were "presuppositionalists" in that they believed that God's revelation was ultimately authoritative for all human knowledge, rather than being subject to the higher authority of factual evidence. Becoming a Christian involves accepting God's Word as the supreme criterion of truth, that is, as one's ultimate presupposition. So the Word of God validates factual evidence, not the

other way around.

Clark held that Christian theism, like other world-views, was like an axiomatic system in mathematics: presupposing certain “axioms” but validated by the criteria of logical consistency and adequacy for its tasks. The axiom of Christianity is the truth of the Bible, but the apologist can persuade inquirers that the Bible is logically consistent and is adequate to its redemptive task. Van Til resisted Clark's view of logic as a test of revelation, holding that logic itself, like factual evidence, is validated by Scripture rather than Scripture by logic. [12] To Van Til, Clark was a rationalist. To Clark, Van Til was an irrationalist.

Others in Reformed circles rejected presuppositionalism altogether for more traditional apologetic approaches. Dr. James Oliver Buswell, one of the premillennial group who broke with Westminster and the OPC, questioned Van Til from a largely empiricist perspective, [13] and several writers from the Christian Reformed church questioned whether Van Til's approach was genuinely Reformed. [14] The “Classical Apologetics” of John Gerstner, R. C. Sproul, and Arthur Lindsley rejects Van Til in favor of an approach based on natural theology and historical evidences, presupposing certain “basic assumptions” including “the law of noncontradiction,” “the law of causality,” and “the basic reliability of sense perception.” [15] The debate continues into the present, with additional alternatives being offered and new voices being heard. [16]

One of those voices is that of philosopher Alvin Plantinga, who describes his position as “Reformed Epistemology.” [17] This position says that people are rationally justified in believing in God without evidence or argument, though such rational beliefs are open to refutation by evidence and argument. In Plantinga's view, we come to know God when our faculties of knowledge, working rightly and placed in the proper environment, come naturally to form a belief in him. This position, I think, is largely right, but it seeks to answer different questions from those of Van Til, Clark, Gerstner, and others. Therefore it isn't really an alternative to these other views, though many consider it to be that. To borrow a distinction of William Lane Craig, Reformed epistemology is more concerned with how we can *know* the truth, whereas presuppositionalism and evidentialism are more concerned with how we can *show* it.

The discussion has, I think, been a useful one, leading the church to ask important questions

(rarely asked in past centuries) about how Reformed theology bears upon epistemology and apologetics. But, as with the debates over eschatology, Christian liberty, and incomprehensibility, the discussion has been far too shrill. It has led to the formation of factions in Reformed community, each assured that it has the truth about apologetics and that the other factions have denied crucial aspects of Reformed theology. Van Til himself questioned the Reformed commitment of those who disagreed with his apologetic approach, and his opponents spoke equally strongly against him.

One may argue that the theology of Calvin and the Reformed confessions has apologetic implications. But the confessions do not deal specifically with apologetics or epistemology, so these should be regarded as open questions in the Reformed churches. Further, it seems to me that this is a subject on which more thinking needs to be done, before we attain a position worthy to be a test of Reformed orthodoxy.

5. Philosophy

Until about 1960, Van Til was associated fairly closely with the Dutch philosophical school of thought known as the “philosophy of the idea of law.” The most famous member of this school was Herman Dooyeweerd, [\[18\]](#) but many others followed more or less the same approach, including D. Th. Vollenhoven, S. U. Zuidema, K. Popma, J. P. A. Mekkes, H. Evan Runner, H. Van Riessen. Around 1960, however, it became evident that Dooyeweerd disagreed with some aspects of Van Til's apologetic system and, more broadly, with the whole idea of making philosophy subject to the “conceptual contents” of Scripture. Van Til, therefore, began to distance himself from the movement.

In the late 1960s, some younger members of this philosophical school, including James Olthuis, Hendrik Hart, and Calvin Seerveld, founded in Toronto the Institute for Christian Studies. [\[19\]](#) The ICS group published, not only technical, but popular articles on philosophical, political, social, and theological issues. Conferences were held in many locations. As with other movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was a radicalism about the presentations that inspired great zeal. The young audiences got the message that traditional Reformed theology was “scholastic,” “dualistic,” and thus not worthy of the Reformers. The only path to true reform, they thought, was to make theology, ethics, politics, and all other spheres of life subject to a Christian philosophy, namely that of Dooyeweerd and his disciples. So the Reformed community went to war again, fighting battles

in churches, seminaries, and Christian schools over these issues.

The ICS leaned toward socialist politics and liberal views on many social and theological issues, but other followers of Dooyeweerd took more conservative positions. My impression is that by the late 1970s the battles in churches and institutions had petered out, though views on these matters continue to be exchanged in academic contexts.

6. Sabbath

Differences over the Sabbath began very early in the history of the Reformed community. Calvin held that in the New Covenant there was no special day divinely mandated for worship and rest. The Puritans and Scots, however, believed that the New Testament “Lord’s Day” (Rev. 1:10) is identical with the Old Testament Sabbath except that it is observed on the first day of the week rather than the seventh. [20] Calvin’s view is reflected in the Heidelberg Catechism, the Puritan view in the Westminster Standards. In the 1960s and ‘70s, the OPC disciplined two ministers who held essentially Calvin’s view of the Sabbath. These cases raised the question of whether Calvin himself would have been sufficiently orthodox to minister in that denomination and the more serious question of whether even the main historic divisions of the Reformed community are capable of ecclesiastical fellowship.

7. Charismatic Gifts

Most Reformed believers hold that the New Testament gifts of tongues and prophecy ceased at the end of the apostolic age. The view that these gifts continue in the church has been thought to conflict with the Reformed view of sola Scriptura, particularly the statement in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1.1) about “those former ways of God’s revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.” Nevertheless, some have argued that although Scripture is our sufficient standard of faith and life, God continues occasionally to reveal himself in other ways. John Calvin says Paul applies the term *prophet* in Eph. 4:11 “not to all those who were interpreters of God’s will, but to those who excelled in a particular revelation. This class either does not exist today *or is less commonly seen* [emphasis mine].” These prophets were “instrumental in revealing mysteries and predicting future events” that “now and again [the Lord] revives them as the need of the time

demands.” [21] Later in the same discussion, he says that God even raised up apostles (probably Calvin refers to Luther) in Calvin's time, for extraordinary purposes. Samuel Rutherford, a member of the Westminster Assembly, reports supernatural predictions of the future among the Reformers. [22] Vern Poythress also cites reports of such extraordinary prophecies from John Flavel, various Scottish covenanters, Peter Marshall, Cotton Mather, and others. [23] Poythress argues that even given the cessation of the apostolic gifts it is still possible to recognize extraordinary works of the Spirit today that are significantly *analogous* to the apostolic gifts. [24]

Nevertheless, two OPC pastors have been disciplined for thinking it possible that the Spirit might do such things today, and many more in various Reformed denominations have been denied ordination on such grounds. A frequent argument is that the Reformed churches must “bear witness against the modern charismatic movement.” It appears, however, that in taking this position the Reformed churches are also bearing witness against a part of their own history.

8. Theonomy

The publication in 1973 of Rousas J. Rushdoony's *Institutes of Biblical Law* [25] and in 1977 of Greg L. Bahnsen's *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* [26] created still another controversy. These books revived a position often held in Reformed history (but never unanimously) that present-day civil states should be governed by the Law of Moses. Specifically, the theonomists argued, the penalties for crimes in Old Covenant Israel should be applied to the same crimes today. So, now as then, adultery, homosexuality, and blasphemy should be capital crimes. The theonomists were very militant in promoting their positions, and those in opposition were equally militant, if not more so. Churches and presbyteries were divided over this issue.

Opponents argued that God's relationship to Old Testament Israel was unique and that the specific laws given to Israel were not intended to rule all other nations. A moderate position [27] is that we must look at each of the laws God gave to Moses, to determine the function of each in redemptive history and civil society, and thus to determine the precise relevance of each statute for our society.

The theonomists, also called Christian reconstructionists, sometimes seemed to be offering a

political program for immediate implementation. Opponents were rather horrified at the idea that someone could take over the government and immediately institute death penalties for any number of actions that had until that time been treated lightly in society. As the discussion proceeded, however, it became evident that the theonomic thesis was actually somewhat more moderate, because (1) in their view, the Old Testament laws could not, and should not, be implemented in modern society until, through preaching of the gospel, those societies were dominated by regenerate people who loved God's law. Since most reconstructionists were postmillennial, they believed that one day Christianity would dominate human culture, but that that might not happen until many centuries into the future. And (2) they believed in a very limited state government, incapable of instituting anything like a reign of terror. In their view, the dominant government in society should be that of the family and the self-government of regenerate individuals.

My sense is that this controversy, like earlier ones, has wound down somewhat, though it continues to be much discussed in classrooms of Christian colleges and seminaries. More moderate positions, like that of Poythress referenced earlier, seem to be winning the day.

9. Covenant and Justification

John Murray taught that the essence of covenant is God's gracious redemptive promise. [\[28\]](#) A younger colleague, Old Testament Professor Meredith G. Kline, argued in his article "Law Covenant" [\[29\]](#) that the essence of covenant is law, not grace, though in the New Covenant Christ bears the penalties of the law as a substitute for his people, thus fulfilling the law covenant by grace. Thus our relationship with God is based strictly on merit: either our own merits, which lead only to condemnation, or the merits of Christ imputed to us and received by faith, which bring us forgiveness and eternal life.

In the 1970s, Norman Shepherd, one of Murray's successors in Westminster's systematic theology department, championed Murray's view of covenant. Shepherd emphasized especially that in the covenant God's grace and human responsibility are inseparable, as by God's Spirit we are united to Christ. In his view, our relationship to God is not based on merit: indeed, "the very idea of merit is foreign to the way in which God our Father relates to his children." [\[30\]](#) Rather, God "promises forgiveness of sins and eternal life, not as something to be earned, but as a gift to be

received by a living and active faith.” [31]

Since saving faith is living and active (James 2:17), Shepherd emphasized that works are a “necessary” evidence of justification by faith. The word “necessary” led to much controversy at Westminster Seminary from 1974 to 1982, and the reverberations from that controversy continue today. Shepherd’s opponents said that he was making works necessary to salvation, compromising the heart of the Reformation, the doctrine of justification by faith alone apart from works. His defenders argued, however, that although works do not in any sense save us, any faith without works is a dead faith, a non-saving faith. Faith doesn’t save because of the good works associated with it, but only because it embraces Christ alone as savior. But neither is saving faith ever without good works. To profess Christ with no interest in serving him is “easy believism” or “cheap grace.” [32]

A number of bodies (Westminster’s faculty, its board, Philadelphia Presbytery of the OPC) studied Shepherd’s position and did not officially pronounce him unorthodox. But the controversy would not quit, and in 1982 Shepherd was asked to resign his position for the good of the seminary community. In my view, that decision was an injustice.

Though Shepherd left Westminster for pastoral positions in the CRC, the controversy continues to this day. The web site www.trinityfoundation.org has published several articles accusing followers of Shepherd of denying the gospel. Westminster’s California campus is now dominated by those (including Meredith Kline, W. Robert Godfrey, Michael S. Horton, and R. Scott Clark) who think that Shepherd’s position is a serious error. [33] But some faculty members at Westminster in Philadelphia, which dismissed Shepherd in 1982, still endorse the main thrust of Shepherd’s position.

10. Law and Gospel

A number of Reformed writers in the 1990s have been attracted to a rather sharp dichotomy between law and gospel, a view historically more typical of Lutheran than of Reformed theology. On this view, the law consists exclusively of commands, threats, and terrors, the gospel exclusively of promises and comforts. There are no comforts in the law, no commands in the gospel. Those who maintain this view say that without a sharp distinction between law and gospel, the law is softened, and the gospel is no longer good news. [34] Such a distinction between law and gospel, they believe,

is implied by the doctrine of justification by God's grace through faith alone. These writers think that the views of Norman Shepherd mentioned earlier confuse law and gospel. The publication *Modern Reformation* has consistently maintained this position, and it is the dominant view of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals and Westminster Theological Seminary in California.

Opponents of this position in the Reformed community argue that the Bible itself does not take pains to separate law and gospel, though it does teach justification by grace through faith alone. The classic biblical statement of the law, the ten commandments, begins by proclaiming God's gracious deliverance of Israel from Egypt and tells Israel to keep the law out of gratefulness for that deliverance (Ex. 20:1-17). Among the commandments themselves are promises of blessing (verses 6 and 12). God is gracious through his law (Psm. 119:29). Similarly, the "gospel" in Scripture is the good news that God reigns; thus it includes the authority of God's law (Isa. 52:7). It includes the command to repent and believe (Mark 1:14-15), and the belief it commands is a living faith, one that does good works (James 2:14-26). [\[35\]](#)

Those holding to the sharp distinction between law and gospel have been known to accuse their opponents of denying the gospel itself. [\[36\]](#) As with the other issues discussed here, this discussion has created a partisan division in the Reformed community.

11. Counseling

Jay E. Adams joined the Westminster (Philadelphia) faculty in the late 1960s, and in 1970 he published *Competent to Counsel*, [\[37\]](#) setting forth his theory of "nouthetic" (later often called "biblical") counseling. Adams was skeptical of secular psychology, believing that Scripture alone was sufficient for pastors to deal with the problems of counselees. He questioned whether there was any such thing as "mental illness," arguing that illnesses were either of the body (the sphere of medicine) or of the soul (the sphere of pastoral care). The biblical counseling movement grew rapidly. Now there are a number of churches, counseling centers, and seminaries that maintain this viewpoint. Adams' movement seeks to bring the Bible to bear on counseling as Van Til brought the Bible to bear on apologetics and philosophy.

But like the other movements we have discussed, Adams' has provoked opposition. His

opponents (sometimes called “integrationists” or “Christian” [\[38\]](#) counselors) say that his counseling is not sufficiently responsive to the data of general revelation. His defenders argue that other forms of counseling substitute worldly wisdom for the teachings of Scripture. Differences also exist concerning the nature of science: is psychology a religiously neutral discipline, or does it operate on religiously significant presuppositions (note the Van Tillian term), antithetical to biblical teaching? The two schools also commonly differ as to the institutional status of counselors: Nouthetic counselors argue that counseling is part of the pastoral ministry of the church. Integrationists often maintain that counselors should be state-licensed professionals outside of ecclesiastical jurisdiction.

I do sense some movement on both sides, especially in the last ten years or so: Integrationists seem to be more and more impressed with insights from Scripture relevant to the problems of people, and nouthetics seem to recognize more and more the importance of general revelation. [\[39\]](#) Adams has always admitted the importance of medical care for physical problems. But the science of the last thirty years has found more and more links between the body and the mind, such as in the treatment of schizophrenia. But for all this *rapprochement*, the mutual suspicion and partisan divisions have been formed, and they do not seem to be going away.

12. The Days of Creation

As in the broader evangelical world, the interpretation of Genesis 1 has been controversial in Reformed circles. Nevertheless, there has been relative peace and tolerance over this issue until recently. A number of Old Princeton professors, including Charles and A. A. Hodge, B. B. Warfield, J. Gresham Machen, and Oswald T. Allis, held that the days of creation were not literally twenty-four hours long. Edward J. Young, who taught Old Testament at Westminster for many years, held that the days referred to long ages of time. [\[40\]](#) In 1957, Meredith G. Kline published an article, “Because it Had Not Rained,” [\[41\]](#) arguing not only that the days were non-literal, but that the narrative does not even teach a temporal sequence of events. Following N. H. Ridderbos, [\[42\]](#) Kline argued that the list of days is a literary framework that has no implications for the length of time or the sequence of events. So in the Reformed community, some have held to literal days, others to age-long days, and others to symbolic days. These positions coexisted fairly comfortably in Reformed churches until around 1980.

But since then many have taken up the cause of twenty-four-hour-day creation, [\[43\]](#) and their disciples have followed the twentieth-century Reformed pattern of being militant about their views. Many Christian Reconstructionists have embraced a literal position, joined by many strict subscriptionists (see later discussion) who base their argument on what the writers of the Westminster Confession are likely to have believed. Some presbyteries in the OPC and the RCUS have denied ordination to candidates who reject the literal view of Genesis 1.

Should one's view of the length of the creation days be a test of orthodoxy? I think not. The exegetical questions are difficult, and I don't believe that any other doctrinal questions hinge on them. A non-literal interpretation does not entail, for example, that Adam was anything but a real person, or that human beings evolved from animals.

13. Worship

The "worship wars" of evangelicalism have also divided the Reformed community. Debate has centered on two specific issues:

(1) *The Regulative Principle*: This phrase denotes the way God regulates the worship of the church. Reformed theology has claimed to maintain a stronger view of sola Scriptura, the sufficiency of Scripture, for worship, than the Lutheran and Anglican traditions. That is the view that all elements of worship must be "prescribed" in Scripture. [\[44\]](#) Not everything done in worship has the status of "element." The *Westminster Confession of Faith* says,

...there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God... common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed. [\[45\]](#)

But what, precisely, is an element, and what is a circumstance? Is the use of musical instruments an element, or a circumstance? And what about the specific words of sermons, prayers, and hymns? These are neither prescribed in Scripture, nor are they "common to human actions and societies." Reformed theologians have taken various positions on these issues.

Some continue to defend the traditional Puritan-Scottish approach which leads to the

exclusive use Psalm-versions as worship songs (without musical instruments), [46] or some variant of that approach, with less drastic consequences. [47] Others hold that the “prescriptions” of Scripture are fairly general, leaving a broader range of freedom than the tradition has recognized. [48] Those holding the latter view argue that although God’s prescriptions for the sacrificial ritual of the tabernacle and temple are very detailed and specific, the Bible prescribes nothing specific about the synagogue worship, and little about the worship of the New Testament church.

(2) *Worship Style*: Some in the Reformed community advocate a very simple style of worship, focused on preaching, emulating the Puritans. Others have advocated a more elaborate ceremony, adapting the liturgies of Geneva and other Reformation churches. Still others have introduced elements associated with contemporary evangelicalism: three or four songs in a row, use of guitars, synthesizers and drums, use of contemporary worship songs, attempts to be sensitive to unchurched visitors. The first two groups have characterized the third as non-Reformed; advocates of contemporaneity accuse the traditionalists of ignoring the Pauline imperative that worship should be edifying (and therefore understandable) to the congregation, even to non-Christian visitors (1 Cor. 14; note especially verses 22-25). [49]

14. Roles of Women

As with other traditions, the Reformed community has been much concerned with the roles of women in family, church, and workplace. The ordination of women to church office has been particularly controversial. As I mentioned earlier, many conservatives left the CRC in the 1990s because that denomination opened all the offices of the church to women. Most of those I defined earlier as “conservative” reject the ordination of women. But one group, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC), which left the PCUSA over its liberal theology, has women elders in some churches, though unlike the PCUSA the EPC does not require congregations to have women officers.

Even those denominations that reject women’s ordination have not escaped controversy. One large congregation recently left the PCA because of controversy over their use of women in worship. A woman stood behind a pulpit and used Scripture in a way that some described as “preaching.” So the controversy in the PCA has come down to the question of whether some biblical restrictions pertain to women that do not pertain to unordained men. That question turns largely on the

interpretation of 1 Cor. 14:33-35 and 1 Tim. 2:11-15. Some argue that these passages exclude women only from the teaching and ruling offices of the church. Others say that in addition to this, women should either be entirely silent during meetings of the church, or at least should not be permitted to teach God's Word to a group that includes men. [\[50\]](#)

There has also been controversy over recent attempts to translate the Bible into "gender-neutral" language, avoiding such things as generic masculine pronouns and the generic "man." [\[51\]](#) In 1997 there was an agreement between a group of evangelical leaders and the International Bible Society, together with Zondervan publishers, that the IBS would not proceed on a plan to revise the New International Version in a gender-neutral direction. But in 2001 IBS and Zondervan announced that they had not abided by this agreement, but were completing work on a translation called "Today's New International Version" (TNIV) that follows a gender-neutral policy. This decision caused a great stir among evangelicals generally, the Reformed among them. [\[52\]](#)

Proponents of gender-neutral translations say that gendered generics are no longer understandable to contemporary readers of English. Opponents say that (1) these generics are understandable, though politically offensive to some, and that (2) replacing them inevitably depersonalizes the biblical message, replacing masculine generics with plurals and abstract terms.

15. Preaching and Redemptive History

Though Geerhardus Vos, Professor of Biblical Theology, stayed at Princeton after Westminster was founded, many Westminster faculty members admired him and were highly influenced by his teaching. Vos taught that Scripture was not a book of doctrinal propositions or ethical maxims, but a history of redemption, narrating the mighty acts of God from creation to consummation.

In 1961, Edmund P. Clowney, Professor of Practical Theology at Westminster, published *Preaching and Biblical Theology* [\[53\]](#) in which, following some Dutch writers of the 1930s and '40s, he argued that the main purpose of preaching is to set forth that redemptive-historical narrative. Negatively, Clowney argued that sermons should not present biblical characters as moral examples (called "exemplarism" and "moralism" in the Dutch discussion), but rather should present the role of

each character in the historical drama that leads to Christ. Thus preaching should always be centered on Christ and the Gospel. This position was carried to an extreme by others who, unlike Clowney, argued that a preacher should never “apply” the Scriptures to moral issues. [\[54\]](#)

Still others are not convinced by this argument. Though grateful for Clowney's drawing our attention to the redemptive-historical drama of Scripture and the centrality of Christ, some have noted that (1) Scripture contains not only narrative, but also laws, proverbs, songs, letters, and apocalyptic, all of which have distinct purposes that preachers should bring out. (2) The intention of biblical writers in describing biblical characters is in part, indeed, to present them as positive or negative examples for human behavior (as Rom. 4:1-25, 1 Cor. 10:1-13, Heb. 11, Jas. 2:21-26, 5:17-18, 2 Pet. 2:4-10, Jude 8-13). (3) Scripture explicitly tells us to imitate Jesus (John 13:34-35) and Paul (1 Cor. 11:1, 2 Tim. 3:10-11), indeed to imitate God the Father (Matt. 5:44-48, 1 Pet. 1:15-16). And Paul tells Timothy also to be an example (1 Tim. 4:12). Imitation is an important means to the believer's sanctification. (4) The whole purpose of Scripture is application: to our belief (John 20:31) and our good works (2 Tim. 3:16-17). (5) Redemptive-historical preachers have sometimes been criticized for interpreting texts arbitrarily to maintain an artificial Christ-centeredness. [\[55\]](#)

16. Subscription

The long-standing Reformed debate over the nature of subscription to confessions continued through the twentieth century. Reformed churches are traditionally confessional, requiring all officers (in some communions, all members) to pledge agreement with historic Reformed confessions, such as the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, the Belgic Confession, etc. The controversy over liberal theology convinced many conservatives that the confessions should be taken more seriously. Some warned, however, that there are dangers in a form of subscription that is too strict: If subscription means that one may never teach anything contrary to the confession, then, for all practical purposes the confessions are unamendable and are placed on the same level of authority as Scripture. Reformed theology embraces sola Scriptura and therefore must allow practical means by which the Bible can lead us to revise the confessions if need be.

Theologians have advocated different views of subscription, some more strict than others. [\[56\]](#) In my judgment, this debate has focused too much on history, not enough on theology. It has stressed

too much the attempt to define the historic view of American Presbyterianism, too little the theological question of what kind of subscription is desirable: both to maintain orthodoxy in the church and to maintain the supremacy of Scripture above all secondary standards.

17. Church Unity

Among the Reformers, Calvin was most concerned with the unity of the church, specifically with the visible unity of the Protestant movement. Resisting the tendency of Protestants to divide into Calvinist and Lutheran camps, Calvin subscribed to a revised version of the Lutheran Augsburg Confession. More recently, however, some Reformed thinkers have subscribed to the notion of “pluriformity,” the view that denominations are, on the whole, a good thing. On this view, denominations are God’s way of dealing with diversity in temperaments, gifts, and doctrines. They maintain peace in the body of Christ in the way that good fences make good neighbors.

Other Reformed theologians, however, have rejected pluriformity, believing that God never ordained denominational division and that he intends for differences among believers to be worked out within the church, not over good fences. [\[57\]](#) That position became more influential in the late twentieth century. Reformed denominations have formed organizations, such as the Reformed Ecumenical Synod, the International and American Councils of Christian Churches, the World Reformed Fellowship, and the National Association of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches. They have sought “fraternal” or “sister church” relationships with other bodies. Some denominations have discussed union with others.

In 1982, the RPES “joined” the PCA and was “received” by them. [\[58\]](#) But the PCA turned down the application of the OPC to be received into the larger denomination. Four years later, the OPC, lacking the necessary two-thirds vote in the General Assembly, rejected a renewed invitation to union with the PCA. Pro-union and anti-union parties engaged in much ecclesiastical warfare during this period.

It seems to me that although Reformed churches are committed in theory to seeking union, there is a notable tendency for them to shy away from any actual union, and indeed to create new divisions unnecessarily. Reformed churches tend to glory in their distinctives: their history, their

ethnic origins, the theological battles of the past that have made them different from others.

Further, when groups of people leave a denomination over some issue, they tend to form new denominations, rather than to join denominations that already exist. So those who left the CRC over the issue of women's ordination did not, for the most part, join other Reformed or Presbyterian denominations, but formed new bodies. In my judgment, these new denominations were unjustified and therefore add to the divisions in the body of Christ.

In the 1990s, the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals (ACE) brought together Christians from various confessional traditions: Lutheran, Reformed, Baptist, Anglican, and others. Their emphasis was on the Reformation *solas*: by Scripture alone, grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, to the glory of God alone. The Alliance showed promise of bringing Christians together. However, to some extent it has itself become divisive, for it has become a party in evangelicalism advocating certain distinctives: a sharp distinction between law and gospel, a "two kingdoms" view of Christ and culture, a history-centered approach to theology, strict subscription, and traditional worship.

18. Tradition in Theology

More should be said, therefore, about the role of tradition in the work of theology. Reformed theology has embraced *sola Scriptura*, a principle which Luther and Calvin used to carry out a radical critique of the ideas and practices of the church of their time. But these Reformers did respect their predecessors, making much use especially of the Church Fathers and Augustine. They accepted the teachings of the early creeds, and they purified worship in a thoughtful, cautious way, critical of the violent change advocated by others.

For thirty years or so there has been a movement in American evangelicalism to recover the past, to remedy the "rootlessness" that many have felt in evangelical churches. In the 1950s and '60s, the intellectual leaders of evangelicalism were for the most part biblical scholars, apologists, and systematic theologians. But at the end of the twentieth century, church historians, and theologians who do their work in dialogue with ancient and recent history, have become more prominent. Reformed theology has participated in this development, so that many of its most prominent figures, such as David Wells, Donald Bloesch, Mark Noll, George Marsden, Darryl Hart, Richard Muller, and

Michael Horton, do theology in a historical mode. Many of these also advocate strict subscription and traditional worship, and they seek to renew an emphasis on Reformation distinctives: hence the discussions of covenant, justification, law, and gospel, noted earlier. The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals has supported this emphasis.

Though this emphasis has done some good by revitalizing interest in the Reformed heritage, some have found deficiencies in the theology emerging from this movement. The main issue is sola Scriptura. The Reformed tradition consists, not in merely repeating previous Reformed traditions, but, as with Calvin, in using the Scriptures to criticize tradition. The history-oriented theologians tend to be uncritical of traditions and critical of the contemporary church. But their arguments are often based on their preferences rather than biblical principle and therefore fail to persuade. The Reformed community, in my judgment, needs to return to an explicitly exegetical model of theology, following the example of John Murray. [\[59\]](#) The exegetical approach is also (perhaps paradoxically) the most contemporary approach, for it applies Scripture directly to our lives today. This question is, of course, one of emphasis. We should never ignore our past. But my view is that the pendulum has swung too far in the direction of a historical emphasis.

19. Sonship

C. John Miller taught practical theology at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia and planted the New Life Church (originally OPC, later PCA). He emphasized the importance of evangelistic, outward-facing ministry in the church and founded World Harvest Mission. [\[60\]](#) He also began a ministry called Sonship, which through conferences and tapes presents a distinctive view of the Christian life: not only justification, but sanctification too is by faith. The way to victory over sin, according to Miller, is not by the law, but by the gospel: looking to Jesus as the one who has born the full guilt of our sins, “preaching the gospel to yourself.” That involves a life of repentance, but also the recognition that Christ has set us free from sin to be his sons and daughters. Some have criticized the Sonship teaching as failing to understand the positive uses of the law in the believer’s spiritual growth. [\[61\]](#)

Sonship has become a major renewal movement in conservative Presbyterian circles, especially the PCA. Those who have taken the Sonship course often emerge with a far more vital

relationship with Christ. Nevertheless, advocates and opponents of Sonship have fought the typical Reformed battles. As with many of the movements and ideas discussed in this paper, I tend to agree with what Sonship affirms (the benefit of preaching the Gospel to ourselves) but not with what it denies (that reflecting on God's law and striving to obey are somehow harmful to our sanctification).

20. Christian Hedonism

John Piper's writings [62] have made a large impact on Reformed and other evangelical believers in the late twentieth century, and their influence continues unabated. Building on some ideas of Jonathan Edwards, Piper argues that the Christian life is essentially an enjoyment of God, for God is glorified when his people enjoy him. The Christian life gets out of kilter when we find ourselves enjoying other things in the place of God. Piper's work has generated a renewal movement similar to that of Sonship, though with a somewhat different message. Piper has been criticized for failing to recognize the theme of the Heidelberg Catechism, that our obedience to God is motivated by gratitude for what he has done for us.

21. Multi-Perspectivalism

Emerging from these battles, it has occurred to some of us that perhaps at least some of these conflicts have resulted from misunderstandings. Some of the disagreements may not be straightforward differences over truth vs. falsity, but to some extent have resulted from people looking at biblical content from different angles or perspectives. The story of the blind men and the elephant is relevant here: one describes the elephant as shaped like a tree trunk, another like a great boulder, another like a thick cable, because one focuses on the leg, the second on the torso, and the third on the trunk. Were they able to see, they would understand that there is truth in all three descriptions, that no description captures the whole animal, and that there is no cause for disagreement.

So I suspect, for example, that the disagreement over the incomprehensibility of God is a difference between some who focus on the continuity between God's thoughts and ours and others who focus on the discontinuity. I see no reason why we cannot affirm both, if we can escape our movement loyalties and read Scripture afresh. On the issue of confessional subscription, I think it

possible to establish a form of subscription that will guard the church against heresy, while at the same time allowing Scripture to function as the church's primary standard, so that the church can, if necessary, revise the confessions according to the Word of God. On the issue of the dynamics of the Christian life, I'm inclined to think that Scripture teaches a number of factors in sanctification: not only reviewing the Gospel (Miller) and scrutinizing our pleasures (Piper), but also asking God's grace to give us thankful hearts (the Heidelberg Catechism), seeking godly models to imitate (as discussed earlier), and reviewing the law to see how our Father wants us to behave (not only theonomy, but the traditional Reformed "third use of the law").

Not every theological difference, of course, is a difference of perspective. Sometimes one must simply choose between one view that is true and another that is false. For example, either women should be ordained to church office, or they should not be. There is no middle ground on this specific issue, and the difference is not merely a difference of perspective. Even here, however, perspectival differences enter into nature of the disagreement. Advocates of women's ordination tend to view the biblical data largely from the perspective of Gal. 3:28: "neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Opponents tend to focus on 1 Cor. 14:33-35 and 1 Tim. 2:11-15. I doubt that unity will be restored on this issue until each group takes the perspective of the other group more seriously.

The main point of multiperspectivalism is that only God is omniscient, seeing reality simultaneously from all possible perspectives. Because of our finitude, we need to look at things first from one perspective, then another. The more different perspectives we can incorporate into our formulations, the more likely those formulations will be biblically accurate.

Several of us have expounded this approach to theology in various places. [\[63\]](#) But alas, multi-perspectivalism itself has become a focus of controversy in Reformed circles. [\[64\]](#) The usual criticism is that multi-perspectivalism is relativist, but multi-perspectivalists deny that criticism emphatically. On our view, there is one objective truth: the truth as God has made it. We can know much of that truth with certainty, based on God's revelation. But there are some matters, even in theology, about which many of us are uncertain. And especially in those cases it is important for us to cross-check our ideas by looking at the data from different perspectives.

Observations

1. I have enumerated 21 areas of conflict occurring in American conservative Reformed circles from 1936 to the present. [\[65\]](#) Under some of those headings I have mentioned subdivisions, subcontroversies. Most of these controversies have led to divisions in churches and denominations, harsh words exchanged between Christians. People have been told that they are not Reformed, even that they have denied the Gospel. Since Jesus presents love as what distinguishes his disciples from the world (John 13:34-35), this bitter fighting is anomalous in a Christian fellowship. Reformed believers need to ask what has driven these battles. To what extent has this controversy been the fruit of the Spirit, and to what extent has it been a work of the flesh?
2. The Machen movement was born in the controversy over liberal theology. I have no doubt that Machen and his colleagues were right to reject this theology and to fight it. But it is arguable that once the Machenites found themselves in a “true Presbyterian church” they were unable to moderate their martial impulses. Being in a church without liberals to fight, they turned on one another.
3. One slogan of the Machen movement was “truth before friendship.” We should laud their intention to act according to principle without compromise. But the biblical balance is “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). We must not speak the truth without thinking of the effect of our formulations on our fellow Christians, even our opponents. That balance was not characteristic of the Machen movement. [\[66\]](#)
4. Reformed people need to do much more thinking about what constitutes a test of orthodoxy. Is it really plausible to say that, say, Gordon Clark's view of incomprehensibility was unorthodox, when neither Clark's nor Van Til's positions are clearly set forth in the Reformed confessions? But again and again through the history described above, writers have read one another out of the Reformed movement (and even out of Christianity) on such dubious bases. The assumption seems to be that *any* difference of opinion amounts to a test of fellowship, that *any* truth I possess gives me the right to disrupt the peace of the church until everybody comes to agree with me. But surely there

are some disagreements that are not tests of orthodoxy, some differences that should be tolerated within the church. Examples include the disagreements over days and the eating of meat described by Paul in Rom. 14, and the disagreements about idol food which he discusses in 1 Cor. 8-10. In those passages, there is no suggestion that people holding the wrong view should be put out of the church. Rather, Paul condemns the party spirit and calls the disagreeing parties to live together as Christian brothers and sisters. In my judgment, the Machen movement thought little about the difference between tolerable and intolerable disagreements in the church.

5. Scripture often condemns a “contentious” spirit (Prov. 13:10, 18:6, 26:21, Hab. 1:3, 1 Cor. 1:11, 11:16, Tit. 3:9) and commends “gentleness” (2 Cor. 10:1, Gal. 5:22, 1 Thess. 2:7, 2 Tim. 2:24, Tit. 3:2, Jas. 3:17). The Reformed community should give much more attention to these biblical themes.
6. With many, though not all, of the issues described above it is possible to see the positions as complementary rather than as contradictory. I believe that is true of the Van Til/Clark controversy, the counseling controversy, the Sonship controversy and some others. As I said earlier, I find these positions more persuasive in what they affirm than in what they deny.
7. With other issues, there are genuine contradictions between the positions of the parties. But even in those cases, I think that often these parties are trying to express complementary biblical truths. Theonomy, for example, emphasizes the continuity between Old and New Testaments, anti-theonomy the discontinuity. A more adequate account will seek to do justice to both.
8. Overall, the quality of thought displayed in these polemics has not been a credit to the Reformed tradition. Writers have gone to great lengths to read their opponents' words and motivations in the worst possible sense (often worse than possible) and to present their own ideas as virtually perfect: rightly motivated and leaving no room for doubt. Such presentations are scarcely credible to anybody who looks at the debates with minimal objectivity.

9. The various anniversary celebrations and official histories in the different Reformed denominational bodies have been largely self-congratulatory. [\[67\]](#) In Reformed circles, we often say that there is no perfect church, that churches as well as individuals are guilty of sin and liable to error. But Reformed writers and teachers seem to find it almost impossible to specify particular sins, even weaknesses, in their own traditions or denominations, particularly in their own partisan groups. A spirit of genuine self-criticism (prelude to a spirit of repentance) is an urgent need.
10. Nevertheless it is important to remember that there are some theological issues that really are matters of life and death for the church. In the PCUSA as of the time of this writing, there are controversies over whether church officers should be expected to observe biblical standards of sexual fidelity and chastity, over the ordination of homosexuals, and over whether Jesus is the only Lord and Savior. The outrageous fact that such issues can actually be debated within the church places other controversies into perspective. The Confessing Church Movement within the PCUSA is fighting a courageous battle, and they deserve the prayers and encouragement of all Reformed believers.
11. My assignment was to write on Reformed theology. But I should note that the remedy for the divisions above is not merely better theological formulations. The almost exclusive focus on doctrinal issues in many Reformed circles is itself part of the problem. As Tim Keller advises, Reformed Christianity needs a vision that encompasses not only doctrinal statements, but also our piety, evangelistic outreach, and missions of mercy. [\[68\]](#)

An Unrealistic Dream

1. That Reformed thinkers continue to have bright, fresh ideas, but that they present these ideas with humility and treat with grace and patience those who are not immediately convinced.
2. That Reformed thinkers with bright ideas discourage the rapid formation of parties to contend for those ideas.
3. That those initially opposed to those bright ideas allow some time for gentle, thoughtful

discussion before declaring the bright ideas to be heresy.

4. That these opponents also discourage the rapid formation of partisan groups.
5. That those contending for various doctrinal positions accept the burden of proof, willing to bear the difficulty of serious biblical exegesis.
6. That we try much harder to guard our tongues (Jas. 3:1-12), saving the strongest language of condemnation (e.g., “denying the gospel”) for those who have been declared heretics by the judicial processes of the church.
7. That Reformed churches, ministries, and institutions be open to a wider range of opinions than they are now—within limits, of course.
8. That we honor one another as much for character and witness as we do for agreement with our theological positions.
9. That occasionally we smile and jest about our relatively minor differences, while praying, worshiping, and working together in the love of Christ. [\[69\]](#)

[\[1\]](#)

I apologize for the large number of adjectives in this phrase, but it does state concisely the range of theology I will seek to analyze in this paper. “Conservative” and “evangelical,” of course, are terms variously defined. Here I will restrict my attention to those types of Reformed theology that credibly subscribe to historic Reformed confessions such as the Westminster Standards and the Three Forms of Unity. The theology of Karl Barth, though often described as conservative, evangelical, and Reformed, does not fit this restriction, because of Barth’s view of Scripture, his denial of God’s eternal decree, and his refusal to identify the events of salvation directly with events of calendar time, among other things.

[\[2\]](#)

New York: Harper, 1930.

[\[3\]](#)

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1925, 1947.

[\[4\]](#)

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923.

[\[5\]](#)

These names and initials can be confusing of course. The denomination founded by Machen was originally called the Presbyterian Church *of* America, which differs from the PCA only by a preposition. In the present-day PCA, my own denomination, we try to remind people that as the church is in the world but not of it, the PCA is *in* America, but not *of* it. Not that Machen would have had any other vision for his own denomination!

[\[6\]](#)

Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed.

[\[7\]](#)

See Garv North. *Dominion and Common Grace* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics. 1987).

Millennialism and Social Theory (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), Rousas J. Rushdoony, *God's Plan for Victory: The Meaning of Postmillennialism* (Fairfax, VA: Thoburn Press, 1977).

[8]

See, for example, David Chilton, *Days of Vengeance* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), a commentary on the Book of Revelation.

[9]

See, for example, www.preteristarchive.com.

[10]

In my judgment, therefore, "incomprehensibility" is a misleading term to describe the issue of the debate.

[11]

For a more thorough description and analysis of the controversy, with bibliography, see John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishers, 1995), 97-113.

[12]

For Clark's position, see his *A Christian View of Men and Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), and *Religion, Reason and Revelation* (Phila.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961). For Van Til's position, see my *Cornelius Van Til*, esp. 141-184.

[13]

See Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Phila.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), 239-267.

[14]

Ibid., 4-20, 267-302. This and the previous section were dropped from later editions of *The Defense of the Faith*. See also James Daane, *A Theology of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), and Van Til, *The Theology of James Daane* (Phila.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1959).

[15]

John Gerstner, R. C. Sproul, and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 70-90. See also my review of this book, published as Appendix A of my *Cornelius Van Til*, 401-422, and also as Appendix A of my *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1994), 219-243.

[16]

See, for example, Steven B. Cowan, ed., *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000). Prof. Alister McGrath, whom we honor in this volume, has made some helpful contributions to this literature, such as *Glimpsing the Face of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), *Explaining Your Faith Without Losing Your Friends* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) and *Intellectuals Don't Need God and Other Modern Myths* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993). If I may say so, however, I think he is not at his best in the Appendix to the latter book that deals with Van Til.

[17]

For the apologetic development of his ideas, see his *Warranted Christian Belief* (NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000). Kelly James Clark, a follower of Plantinga, has used this approach in *Return to Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) and in Cowan, op. cit., 265-312.

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Dooyeweerd's magnum opus is *De Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee*, translated into English as *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1953), four volumes. A more popular presentation of his ideas is *In the Twilight of Western Thought* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1958).

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Some writings from the early North American phase of the movement: Hendrik Hart, *The Challenge of Our Age* (Toronto: Association for the Advancement of Christian Scholarship, 1968), Hart, *Understanding Our World: An Integral Ontology* (Lanham, MD: Univ. Press of America, 1984), L. Kalsbeek, *Coutours of a Christian Philosophy* (Toronto: Wedge, 1975), Calvin Seerveld, *A Christian Critique of Art and Literature* (Toronto: Association for the Advancement of Christian Scholarship, 1968). For my critique, see Frame, *The Amsterdam*

Philosophy: a Preliminary Critique (Phillipsburg, NJ: Harmony Press, 1972) and *Cornelius Van Til*, 371-386.

For an attempt to apply Dooyeweerdian ideas to systematic theology, see Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

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For a discussion of these positions, see Richard B. Gaffin, *Calvin and the Sabbath* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 1998). Still others hold that the New Covenant abrogates the Sabbath, but replaces it with the Lord's Day, a first-day celebration of the Resurrection, but not a day of rest. See Donald A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

[21]

Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.3.4.

[22]

Rutherford, *A Survey of Spirituall Antichrist...* (London: Andrew Crooke, 1948) 1.7, 42-44, cited by Poythress; see following note.

[23]

Poythress, *Modern Spiritual Gifts as Analogous to Apostolic Gifts: Affirming Extraordinary Works of the Spirit within Cessationist Theology* (Glenside, PA: Westminster Campus Bookstore, n. d.). See also Greg Barrow, *A Reformation Discussion of Extraordinary Predictive Prophecy Subsequent to the Closing of the Canon of Scripture* (Edmonton, AL: Still Waters Revival Books, 1998). The latter author and publisher represent the Puritan Reformed Church, an extremely small and highly traditionalist denomination that regards most conservative Presbyterian groups (such as OPC, PCA, RPNA) as apostate because they do not subscribe to the Scottish *Solemn League and Covenant*. In this case, ironically, their very traditionalism leads them to a position considered in the OPC to be a concession to the modern charismatic movement.

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Poythress, *Modern Spiritual Gifts*.

[25]

No place of publication listed; Craig Press. I reviewed this book in *Westminster Theological Journal* 38:2 (Winter, 1976), 195-217.

[26]

No place of publication listed; Craig Press. A second, expanded edition, including responses to critics, was published in 1984.

[27]

For a more balanced discussion of the relevance of Old Testament law to the Christian, see Vern Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Brentwood: Wohlgemuth and Hyatt, 1991).

[28]

See his pamphlet, *The Covenant of Grace* (London: Tyndale Press, 1954). See also "Covenant Theology" in his *Collected Writings* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1984), 4.216-240. In his lectures on systematic theology, he says that "covenant in Scripture denotes the oath-bound confirmation of promise," *Collected Writings* 2.49.

[29]

Westminster Theological Journal 27 (1964-65), 1-20. See also his *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), *By Oath Consigned* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), and *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

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Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 39.

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Ibid.

[32]

This controversy somewhat parallels the controversy in broader evangelical circles over "Lordship salvation," the debate over whether one can confess Jesus as savior without confessing him as Lord.

Shepherd's reasoning implies that one cannot.

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An error "of Galatian proportions," according to one Westminster/California professor in correspondence.

[34]

See, for example, Michael Scott Horton, "The Law and the Gospel," at

www.alliancenet.org/pub/articles/horton.LawGospel.html.

[35]

For more discussion, see my "Law and Gospel," at [http://www.reformationrevival.com/WeeklyE-](http://www.reformationrevival.com/WeeklyE-News/Semper%20Archive/LawandGospel.html)

[News/Semper%20Archive/LawandGospel.html](http://www.reformationrevival.com/WeeklyE-News/Semper%20Archive/LawandGospel.html), or <http://www.chalcedon.edu/articles/0201/020104frame.shtml>.

[36]

My basis for this statement consists of email exchanges and personal conversations.

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No place of publication listed: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishers.

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As opposed to "biblical"!

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For a review of developments since Adams' original work, describing recent *rapprochement* between the two schools and specifying the remaining differences, see David Powlison, "Questions at the Crossroads: The Care of Souls and Modern Psychotherapies," in Mark McMinn and Timothy Phillips, eds., *Care for the Soul: Exploring the Intersection of Psychology and Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), 23-61. See also Powlison, "Crucial Issues in Contemporary Biblical Counseling," *Journal of Pastoral Practice*, 11:3 (1988), 53-78.

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See Young, *Studies in Genesis One* (Phila.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964).

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Westminster Theological Journal 20 (1957-58), 146-157. Later he amplified his views in "Space and Time in the Genesis Cosmogony," in *Perspectives on Science and the Christian Faith* 48 (1996), 2-15.

[42]

Ridderbos, *Is There a Conflict Between Genesis 1 and Natural Science?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957).

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Some recent examples: Noel Weeks, *The Sufficiency of Scripture* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1988), 95-118, Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 392-94, James B. Jordan, *Creation in Six Days* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1999).

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Westminster Confession of Faith, 21.1. Compare 1.6, 20.2. Lutherans and Anglicans argue that we may do anything in worship that Scripture does not *forbid*, keeping in mind the overall biblical purposes of worship.

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1.6.

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For example, Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown and Covenant Publications, 1980).

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As in D. G. Hart and John Muether, *With Reverence and Awe* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002).

[48]

See my *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1996) and "A Fresh Look at the Regulative Principle" in David G. Hagopian, ed., *Always Reformed*, forthcoming.

[49]

The earlier-referenced book by Hart and Muether argues for traditional worship. My *Contemporary Worship Music: a Biblical Defense* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1997) argues for a more contemporary approach.

[50]

For these views and others, see Bonnidell and Robert Clouse, *Women in Ministry: Four Views* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1989). The most helpful treatments of these issues in my view are James Hurley,

Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) and John Piper and Wayne Grudem, ed., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991).

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Some feminists have advocated that God himself be designated without gender or even as a female. Zondervan and IBS did not go this far.

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For different viewpoints on this question, see D. A. Carson, *The Inclusive-Language Debate* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), Mark L. Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), and Vern Poythress and Wayne Grudem, *The Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2000). The last is most persuasive to me.

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Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961.

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For this more extreme position, see the publication *Kerux*.

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For a longer discussion of these points, see my "Ethics, Preaching, and Biblical Theology," at www.thirdmill.org.

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The case for "full" subscription is made by Morton H. Smith in *The Subscription Debate* (Greenville, SC: Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, no date listed; published 1993 or later). A less conservative view is William S. Barker, "System Subscription," *Westminster Theological Journal* 63 (2001), 1-14. Four elders participated in a debate on subscription before the PCA General Assembly of 2001, which was published in the denominational web magazine, *PCA News*, at <http://www.christianity.com/pcanews>.

[57]

See John Murray, *Collected Writings* 1.269-287 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995), John Frame, *Evangelical Reunion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), also available at www.thirdmill.org.

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The process of "joining and receiving" was a procedure designed to minimize pre-union negotiations, the idea being to work out differences after union rather than before. Arguably this is a more biblical procedure than the conventional negotiation, since Scripture tells Christians to work out their differences within the church rather than to shout at one another over denominational barriers. In practice, however, the RPES and PCA did engage in much negotiation and discussion before the union was approved.

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I have argued these points at greater length in "In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism," *Westminster Theological Journal* 59 (1997), 269-318, with responses by Richard Muller and David Wells, reprinted as an Appendix to *Contemporary Worship Music*. See also my "Traditionalism" at www.thirdmill.org and in *Chalcedon Report* 434 (Oct., 2001), 15-19, and 435 (Nov., 2001), 14-16.

[60]

Among his writings are *Repentance and Twentieth-Century Man* (Phila.: Christian Literature Crusade, 1980), *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), *Powerful Evangelism for the Powerless* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1997).

[61]

For a positive exposition of Sonship, read Neil H. Williams, *Theology of Sonship* (Phila.: World Harvest Mission, 2002). For a critique, Jay E. Adams, *Biblical Sonship* (Woodruff, SC: Timeless Texts, 1999).

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See especially his *Desiring God* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1996).

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See John Frame. *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1987). *Perspectives on the Word*

of God (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999), Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1999).

[64]

Mark Karlberg, "On the Theological Correlation of Divine and Human Language: A Review Article," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 32:1 (March, 1989), 99-105, and his review of my *Cornelius Van Til* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1995) in *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 9:2 (Fall, 1993), 297-308. I have replied to both Karlberg pieces in Appendices to my *Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002).

[65]

Of course, between 1900 and 1936 the chief battle was over theological liberalism. There was also a major conflict in the CRC over the doctrine of common grace, leading to the formation of the Protestant Reformed Church. I cannot enter into that controversy here, but I have addressed it in my *Cornelius Van Til* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1995), 215-230.

[66]

Machen, like others in the Reformed tradition, emphasized the "primacy of the intellect." See his *What is Faith?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1925, reprinted 1962). As Ulrich Zwingli eliminated music from the worship service, turning it into a teaching meeting, Reformed leaders through history have tended to value intellectual rigor at the expense of people's emotions. In my judgment, this intellectualism is a mistaken emphasis and needs to be overcome. See my *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1987), 319-346.

[67]

See, for example, Darryl Hart and John Muether, *Fighting the Good Fight* (Phila: The Committee on Christian Education and the Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1995). Though there is much useful information and reflection in this book, there is far too little recognition of possible inadequacies within the tradition.

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See Keller, "The Vision of PPLN," available at http://www.pastoral-leadership.org/articles/PPLNvision_Keller.pdf.

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Thanks to Steve Hays, D. Clair Davis, David Powlison, John Muether, and Greg Welty, who read an earlier draft of this paper and made helpful suggestions. I take all responsibility for the final formulation.