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Our Multiple Calvinisms: Historical Trajectories, Contemporary Predicaments, and Contestable Futures



by Keith C. Sewell

In this slightly amplified and edited version of the paper that I delivered at the Calvinism for the 21st Century Conference at Dordt College in April 2010, I focus on the continuities and discontinuities between the Reformed Christianity that emerged in the sixteenth century and was readily associated with the life and work of John Calvin (1509-1564), and the kind of “neo-Calvinist” or “reformational” Christianity represented by Abraham Kuyper

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(1837-1920) and his followers. My orientation is towards the latter. In certain respects, this discussion may be seen as the prelude to a future historiography of Calvinism that could be called reformational rather than biographical or narrowly theological in its agenda. At the same time this paper also draws upon my current work on the roots, character, and development of evangelicalism.

Introduction

All discussions of “Calvinism”—including “the new Calvinism” and/or “neo-Calvinism”—are prone to flounder because of the semantic range and multiple connotations of the term itself. A resolution of the resulting ambiguities can be achieved by historical analysis. Recent developments underline the desirability of such a resolution, for now there is a “new Calvinism” emerging within the many-sided phenomenon that is North-American evangelicalism. The names of John Piper of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, and Mark Driscoll of Mars Hill Church, Seattle, Washington, are prominent in this context. To these may be added Charles J. Mahaney of “Sovereign Grace Ministries” and John Fullerton MacArthur, Jr., of Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, California. This latter trend—somewhat distinguishable from the positions exemplified by earlier and other North-American “Reformed” evangeli-

cals, such as R. C. Sproul of “Ligonier Ministries,” R. Albert Mohler of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and the Southern Baptist Convention, and the late James Kennedy (1930-2007)—is less emphatically separatist in outlook, more inclined to be ecumenically open, and capable of exhibiting more nuanced cultural and civic sensibilities.

Simultaneously, active in North America at least since the major Dutch migration to Canada in the post-war era are those who were influenced by the *gereformeerde* movement, represented by figures such as Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck (1854-1921), exemplified by the founding of the Free University at Amsterdam in 1880 and philosophically sharpened by Dirk Hendrik Theodoor Vollenhoven (1892-1978) and Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977). The latter are frequently characterized as “neo-Calvinists.” Notwithstanding trials and tribulations—some self-inflicted—this movement has exerted a degree of influence through the Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto; an array of colleges; and figures such as H. Evan Runner (1916-2002), Calvin Seerveld, Roy Clouser, and James Skillen.

Moreover, the twentieth century also witnessed a wonderful blossoming of historical research into the life, teaching, and impact of John Calvin himself. Karl Barth (1886-1968), and the manner of his early twentieth-century repudiation of theological liberalism, certainly imparted considerable initial impetus to this development. He helped put Calvin back on the research agenda. From the 1930s onwards, great engines of research have been deployed in what William Bouwsma once called the “quest for the historical Calvin”—as the profusion of 500th anniversary conferences in 2009 amply demonstrated.¹ However Calvin is understood and defined, the study of Calvin is no longer in any sense the monopoly of Calvinists of any or every stripe.

I

My present concern, however, is not so much the study of Calvin himself—although he is unquestionably part of the story—as it is the history of “Calvinism” in its diversity. More specifically, I would like to explore how these multiple Calvinisms, including those of the “new

Calvinism” and the successors to Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven, relate to one another—if at all—and to formulate a historical explanation for the multiple Calvinisms currently on offer. Yet, there is more. We must also reckon with that other term—“Reformed.” Often “Calvinistic” and “Reformed” are used as if synonymous and, therefore, interchangeable—with preference sometimes given to “Reformed” in order to emphasize that there is more to all of this than Calvin and his teaching.²

Clarity begins to emerge after we jettison the notion that the sixteenth century witnessed a single generic “protestant reformation.” Premature generalization is the enemy of historical understanding, and it is only after we have confronted the sheer diversity and complexity of this development that we can safely offer carefully nuanced generalizations. As I have argued elsewhere, the protestant reformations were, from the outset, divided by four distinctive views of *how* the Scriptures were authoritative for the church and in life generally.

After recognizing that no standpoint is ever followed with complete consistency, these four views may be characterized as follows:

1. the *corrective*, as adopted by the *Evangelische* (Lutherans), emanating from Wittenberg and also in the Church of England under Edward VI and from Elizabeth I onwards;
2. the *regulative*, as announced by Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531) and later Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575) in Zürich, exemplified by John Knox (1514-1572) and Andrew Melville (1545-1622) in Scotland, and exemplified by the “Puritans,” who sought the further reformation of the English Church;
3. the *exemplary*, as espoused by the Anabaptists in various parts of German-speaking Europe and beyond, with their desire to achieve authenticity by recovering and living according to (whatever their view was of) the true New Testament pattern;
4. the *directional* as exemplified by John Calvin and his circle in Geneva.

For the purposes of our present discussion, we may dispose of the first and third promptly. The *Evangelische* of the German *Länder* and Scandinavia,

as well as the English Church, followed the corrective way of Wittenberg: that which was not expressly forbidden in scripture (vestments, ceremonies) might be retained. Those things supposedly indifferent (*adiaphora*) were retained, subject to the lesser checks of “reason” and received tradition.

In sharp contrast, the Anabaptists sought to reconstitute Christianity *de-novo*, repudiating paedobaptism because nowhere did the New Testament say, “thou shalt baptize babies.” Often persecuted,

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sometimes subject to millennial-apocalyptic delusions, they sought to live straight out of their reading of the New Testament, as if they could counter-historically excise the intervening centuries. Sometimes deeply pious, they shunned public office as inevitably entailing complicity with “the world.”

Of course, none of this precludes cross-borrowings and other influences. For example, the Church of England took a basically corrective view of church polity but did not adopt Luther’s view of the Eucharist (consubstantiation). On that point it was much more influenced by Zürich.

II

For this present discussion, the *regulative* and the *directional* are the most important. Here we *start* to address the historical roots of our current “Calvinistic and Reformed” ambiguities. The Zürich reformation of Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) and Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575) was conspicuous for its adherence to what became known as

the “regulative principle”: only that which is expressly commanded in Scripture or legitimized by clear scriptural example is lawful in the life of the church and the Christian lives of its members. Where Puritanism is honored, there the regulative principle is likely to be appreciated, if not always followed consistently.

At first sight, the reformers of Zürich seemed to be at one with the a-historical restorationism of the Anabaptists—it certainly looked that way from the standpoint of Wittenberg. However, the Zürich re-baptizers were soon disappointed with Zwingli and his municipally-backed “magisterial reformation,” even as their critique helped drive the Zürich Reformers themselves to their covenantal view of biblical teaching, not least in respect of the ordinance of baptism. In short, Zürich’s “regulative” standpoint was the touchstone of its “Reformed” distinctiveness. Its view of baptism distinguished it sharply from the Anabaptists; its view of the Eucharist separated it sharply from the view of Luther and his followers. The “regulative” approach to church polity and public worship produced that unaffected simplicity that many of us cherish half a millennium later.

So where do we place John Calvin (1509-1564) and the circle around him—people such as Guillaume Farel (1489-1565) and Pierre Viret (1511-1571)? They certainly shared much with the Reformed of Zürich. Yet their stance on how the Bible is authoritative was not the same as that of the German speakers. I suggest that theirs was a *directional* approach, based more on a distillation and application of *scriptural principle* in a new situation, *not* on a rigid codification of assorted biblical texts unchangingly applicable for all time—that kind of development was to come later. Committed to discerning scriptural principle, Calvin was not bound a-historically to the *ipsissima verba* of Scripture. This commitment to principle over words is evident in his approach to the question of charging interest and ecclesiastical polity, where he calmly added “doctor of the church” to the range of office bearers.

Geneva and Zürich had much in common but differed markedly on the authority of the civil magistrate in relation to the inner life of the institutional church. *Directional-reformed* Geneva upheld

the principle of the church's distinctive integrity under Jesus Christ through ecclesiastical assemblies. The civil power—the “godly magistrate”—ought to support the church but not to usurp that authority intrinsic to the institutional church and its assemblies. By contrast, *Regulative-reformed* Zürich—looking to Old Testament rulers at their best—accepted the “godly magistrate” as authoritative, also in and over ecclesiastical affairs. The 1568 controversy between George Withers and Thomas Erastus in Heidelberg served to highlight this discontinuity. In this confrontation, Withers was supported by Theodore Beza (1519-1605) of Geneva, and Erastus was supported by Rudolph Gwalther (1519-1586) of Zürich.

III

Similarly, the 1554-1555 Knox-Cox “troubles at Frankfurt” reflected a confrontation between the *corrective* and *regulative* views of worship, as did the 1550 confrontation in England between Nicholas Ridley (1500-1555) and John Hooper (1495-1555) over vestments. Both men perished in the Marian persecutions. Early Protestantism never achieved a single view of how Scripture was authoritative in relation to doctrine, worship, and life generally. Neither was there complete unanimity between Zürich and Geneva on the Eucharist; their lack of unanimity makes their accord on the question (the *Consensus Tigurinus* of 1549) all the more commendable.

At least by the 1560s, Reformed thinking can be seen to be developing more rigorously in the direction of a scholasticism that was always present, at least latently. Here lay new sources of division. Scottish Presbyterianism and English Puritanism favored the alternative to Aristotle offered by the Huguenot Peter Ramus (1515-1572). By contrast, post-Calvin Geneva under the leadership of Theodore Beza resolved to stick with Aristotle.³ The later and fuller development of “reformed scholasticism” was to go hand in glove with the emergence of a rigorous “reformed confessionalization”—and it should not escape our attention that the Reformed confessions, now considered definitive, almost entirely post-date the first and second generation of Reformers.⁴

The need to respond to the Council of Trent (1545-1563) clearly played a role here. After Calvin's

death, Beza's style of dogmatics—schematically represented by the “*Golden Chain*” of theological reasoning, popularized by William Perkins (1558-1602)—eventually ruled the roost also in Geneva. The earlier directional way suffered eclipse, if not obliteration. Such scholasticism was oriented towards, and sought strength and comfort in, a fixed doctrinal system. It thought in terms of unchanging “eternal truths” and came to equate these with its logically founded “systematic theology,” not least as epitomized in the later sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed confessions.

The resulting static architecture of interlinked and mutually re-enforcing propositions shared with Aristotle a negative view of historical change.⁵ Here we find the roots of the approach presupposed in the expression favored by many Presbyterians in North America when they assert that the Confession of Faith be affirmed as “containing the system of doctrine taught in the holy Scriptures.”⁶ Such expressions presume that there is a single static theological systematic somehow embedded in (or perhaps hidden behind) the biblical texts that only an elite *cognoscenti* of logically trained theological specialists are able to elicit for the rest of us.

These tendencies were becoming well entrenched by the early seventeenth century, and provide part of the background to the famed “Synod of Dort” (1618-1619), the *Canons* of which have always been open to the criticism that their logical symmetry and deductive rigor exceed what a plain and unforced reading of Scripture would support. And, it will be remembered, it was not long before, perhaps inevitably, Moses Amyraut (1596-1664) arrived upon the scene to challenge the “Canons of Dort” in the name of John Calvin himself.

In short, Calvin was but one voice—certainly the most significant one—among all those enjoying the appellation “Reformed.” Calvin and his circle were all “Reformed”—but not all of the Reformed might be termed “Calvinistic” if that term is used with any degree of precision. What we might term the “non-Calvinist Reformed” were much less oriented towards what we have termed the “directional” view of biblical authority—which already in the era of Beza and Perkins was fading from view, also in Geneva. The rise of

scholasticism and confessionalization were dominant factors in this process. In other words, what was once distinctive about the Calvin-led reformation in Geneva, especially its directional orientation, became lost as Calvin's work and reputation were absorbed and subsumed under the more generic heading "Reformed," while simultaneously Reformed theology became increasingly scholastic.

In all of this, we need to remember that terms such as "Calvinist" and "Calvinism" seem to have been first used by the *Evangelische*, around the 1570s (by the time the directional outlook was being lost sight of), in the context of the post-Luther debates within Lutheranism and centering on the so-called "crypto-Calvinism" (*Der Kryptocalvinismus*) among the followers of Philipp Melancthon (1497-1560). Of such a use of his name, we may confidently assert, Calvin would not have approved.

IV

Late Reformed and Lutheran *pietism* arose in response to scholastic-style formalism in doctrine and worship that came with scholasticism and confessionalization. Especially amongst the Reformed, questions of how the "divine decree" related to personal assurance of salvation drove many in a deeply introspective direction. It still does because a secret decree can seem to be inserted between Christ and the believer. Such was the situation at least by the end of the seventeenth century.

This brings us to the emergence of evangelicalism in the *Anglophone world*. The critical factor in the transition from late pietism to early evangelicalism was the work of Count Nicolaus von Zinzendorf (1700-1760) and the renewed (post 1727) Church of the Moravian Brethren (*Unitas Fratrum*). The fervent missionary impulse of the Moravians, when injected into late Puritan pietism—exemplified by figures such as John Bunyan (1628-1688)—produced the intense activism characteristic of evangelicalism ever since.

Certainly, eighteenth-century European Protestantism was in sore need of being awakened from its formalistic slumbers. Yet from the outset there were serious problems. Among them was Zinzendorf's manner of repeatedly asserting the primacy of "heart" (*Herz*) over "head" (*Kopf*). Of course, there is a deeply spiritual way of saying this,

but in his case it came with a definite disparagement of intellectual inquiry and understanding (*Kopfwissenschaft*). This disparagement arose from an understandable yet simplistic reaction against an earlier theological-rational system-building. Here we may discern the roots of the anti-intellectualism (and resulting "intellectual deficit") so characteristic of much Anglophone evangelicalism—not least in its later, more pronounced, fundamentalist expressions. Zinzendorf profoundly influenced George Whitefield (1714-1770), John Wesley (1703-1791), and Charles Wesley (1707-1788). The resultant movement, from the 1740s onwards, was widely variegated. In New England it was represented by Gilbert Tennent (1703-1764) and Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). It ran through and across existing post-1688 denominational and confessional boundaries.

Late Reformed and Lutheran pietism arose in response to scholastic-style formalism in doctrine and worship that came with scholasticism and confessionalization.

David Bebbington has captured well the "quadrilateral of priorities" that characterize evangelicalism: "**conversionism**, the belief that lives need to be changed; **activism**, the expression of the gospel in effort; **biblicism**, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called **crucicentrism**, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross."⁷

This valuable formula covers the otherwise baffling diversity that historic and contemporary evangelicalism otherwise exhibits: paedo-Baptist/Baptist; established/free church; post/pre/a-millennial; dispensational/non-dispensational; main-line participant/separatist. Of course, one of the earliest divisions was soteriological: Whitefield stood for "free grace," while the Wesleyans endorsed Arminianism and feared "antinomianism."

The ensuing controversy—spanning the 1740s to 1770s—acquired the title of “the Calvinistic Controversy.”

Here we encounter the source of the *Anglophone* conception of “Calvinism” as expressed in terms of the famed “Five Points of Calvinism”—derived from the Canons of Dort. The “TULIP” acronym, let it be noted, works in English—but not in Dutch! This nomenclature has been profoundly misleading. It would make more historical sense to speak of five counter-reformed points of the Remonstrants, but many decades of usage have saddled us with this acronym. Moreover, it leaves English-speakers with the impression that the only outstanding feature of Calvin’s thought were five specific and controversial topics. Few men in history have had their actual teaching and intentions so seriously misrepresented.

In the United States, the dominant orientation of evangelicalism in the nineteenth century was individualistic and Wesleyan. Those who saw themselves in the lineage of Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) wrestled with the implications of “new measures” in evangelism, measures that inclined in the direction of an outlook that was at least semi-Pelagian. And so it was that revivalist “new school” Presbyterians found themselves in tension with their more conservative “old school” confessionalist co-religionists.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, core evangelicalism—its intellectual deficit all too often on display—was reacting to new thinking in the sciences and biblical studies with a fundamentalism well capable of crossing the line into obscurantism. When such evangelicals venture into the political arena, they are prone to be at once individualistic, moralistic, and coercive instead of advocating public justice for all citizens—in the U. S., their fundamentalist approach to the biblical texts coheres well with their ahistorical, strict constructionist approach to Constitutional interpretation.

It should be emphasized that within this evangelicalism there has always been a “Calvinistic” subset; “Calvinistic” here, however, is something of a misnomer. What such evangelical “Calvinists” are affirming is that they identify with the five (or at least four of the five) “points” asserted by

the counter-Remonstrants in opposition to the Remonstrant followers of Arminius. Their confessional stance tends to be that of the “Westminster Standards,” or the “Three Forms of Unity.” In other words, when this distinct minority of evangelicals call themselves “Calvinists,” they are usually making a soteriological point (with some evangelistic-style consequences) *within* the parameters of Bebbington’s conversionism/activism/Biblicism/crucicentrism “quadrilateral of priorities.”

V

By contrast, events in the Netherlands took a different turn. There, the aristocratic Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1876) was initially influenced by the pietism of the *Réveil*. The turning point came in the 1860s when Groen van Prinsterer, in conjunction with Abraham Kuyper, transcended the boundaries of their initial conservatism and, once again taking up a *directional* orientation, devised a program that contemplated new ventures and structures in a setting already profoundly re-shaped as a result of the French Revolution. Arguably the most important initiative was the founding of the Free University, Amsterdam (1880).

This institution provided the context for the next-generation work of Vollenhoven and Herman Dooyeweerd, appreciation of which continues to ripen across the globe. They pursued with philosophical precision what Kuyper had outlined only programmatically. They opposed in principle any attempts to align Christian doctrine with non-biblical starting-points. They rejected scholasticism and questioned prevalent notions of theology. They called for a *biblically-directed* reformation of philosophy and the encyclopedia of the special sciences. They called for integral and coherent thinking while exposing the *hubris* of closed intellectual systems. Their approach was *reformational* (*Reformatoerisch*). Perhaps the greatest work was done in the 1920s and ’30s; and it is no coincidence that at this time, the “history of the covenant” (*verbondsgeschiedenis*) school of biblical exposition arose in the Netherlands, with its non-static *directional* “grand narrative” theme of “creation, fall and redemption in the communion of the Holy Spirit.”

Here we encounter a decisive contrast.

Bebbington's methodologically valuable "quadrilateral" of priorities (conversionism/activism/Biblicism/crucicentrism), which applies to evangelicals generally (including "Reformed" or so-called "Calvinist" evangelicals), omits any substantive reference to the order of creation, any recognition of the religious "before the face of God" character of human culture, and the importance of integral Christian thinking. To the extent that these priorities are present in Calvin's writings, the reformational alternative of Kuyper, Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd may rightly call itself "neo-Calvinist."

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, core evangelicalism—its intellectual deficit all too often on display—was reacting to new thinking in the sciences and biblical studies with a fundamentalism well capable of crossing the line into obscurantism.

Kuyper often described his approach as "Calvinistic" (*Calvinistisch*), and he had sound reasons for doing so, for as much as he delighted in the "old writers" (*oude schrijvers*), he had nevertheless recovered something of the genuinely Calvinistic *directional* approach to biblical authority, which was to be more fully exemplified by the later "history of the covenant" writers, with their strong emphasis on the biblical grand narrative.⁸ With considerable justification, this line may be called "neo-Calvinist." By contrast, the "new Calvinism" that has more recently emerged in North America represents a further variation within the already highly variegated spectrum of evangelical options.

VI

So, what sort of futures might we contemplate for (evangelical) "new Calvinism" and (reformational) "neo-Calvinism"? Much contemporary Christianity, not least evangelicalism, exhibits symptoms of stress and volatility. The "Calvinist" evangelicals (including "Jonathan Edwards is My Homeboy" T-shirt wearers) may prove to be yet another of those passing vogues to which *Anglophone* evangelicalism is prone. Of evangelicalism generally, it may be expected that, for as long as it remains tethered to the prioritization represented by Bebbington's "quadrilateral," it will be unable to exceed its inherent limitations and attain to the more full-orbed and integral understanding of Christian discipleship that the reformational orientation offers.

Concurrently, reformational "neo-Calvinism" *may* nevertheless become yet more fruitful, especially if it can find ways of not being tied to Reformed denominationalism. Certainly, we are well past the point where the legacies of Kuyper and his philosophical heirs are discussed only within a restricted circle. The work of writers such as Jonathan Chaplin, Roy Clouser, John Witte, and Lambert Zuidervaart are now published by respected university presses. This is important: impediments notwithstanding, this movement is now transcending the restrictions of its initial circumstances in the Anglophone world; as a result, an increasing range of interlocutors may be anticipated, among them various strands of contemporary evangelicalism.

So is there any common ground between evangelical "new Calvinism" and a reformational "neo-Calvinism? My answer is that currently they are on different trajectories—but a common notion of *dependence* may provide a basis for constructive conversation. Shorn of the scholasticism, the Canons of Dort (1619) were saying that our deliverance *depends* entirely on the grace of God, and what reformational thinking insists on is that all things—creation, culture—*depend* on and cohere in Jesus Christ.

It is also true that we who term ourselves *reformational* need to listen very carefully to others, even as we have much that is deeply biblical to offer, especially to those who, while continuing to affirm

their Christian discipleship, are ready to reconsider their version of evangelicalism. Undeterred by prevalent confusions, and while denominationalism continues to decline, let us always be ready to evade barriers and share insight with everyone, as we continue to look in the direction of the coming of the kingdom.

Endnotes

1. William Bouwsma, "The Quest for the Historical Calvin," in *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 77 (1986): 47-57.
2. This paper is therefore not immediately concerned with the different schools of contemporary Calvin interpretation, although the latter do reflect in some measure the distinctions that I will draw. Cf. Heiko A. Oberman, "Calvin's Critique of Calvinism," in *The Dawn of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T and T. Clark, 1986), 259-268.
3. *Correspondance de Théodore de Bèze* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, ongoing), ed. by Hippolyte Aubert, *et al.*, Volume XI, (1983), 295.
4. In the Anglophone world, recognition of the importance of "confessionalization" owes much to the work of Bodo Nischan (1939-2001). See his *Prince*, *People and Confession: The Second Reformation in Brandenburg* (Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994) and especially the papers in *Lutherans and Calvinists in the Age of Confessionalism* (Farnham, England: Ashgate Publishing, 1999).
5. Cf. Aristotle, *The Poetics*, at 1451b.
6. Leonard J. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition: A Reexamination of Colonial Presbyterianism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949), 301.
7. David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (London: Unwin, Hyman, 1989), 3, *cf.* 5-17. Oliver Barclay has added his own gloss to Bebbington's formulation in order to facilitate a distinction between his preferred "classical evangelicalism" on one side, and "liberal evangelicals," and possibly "charismatic evangelicals" on the other. Oliver Barclay, *Evangelicalism in Britain, 1935-1995: A personal sketch* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1997), 10-14, *cf.* 100, 116-117, and 137-141.
8. See, especially, Simon Gerrit de Graaf (1889-1955), *Promise and Deliverance*, four volumes (St. Catherines, Ontario: Paideia Press, 1977-81). For the context, see Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1970).