



CONSTRUCTIVE CALVINISM¹

Rooted in Scripture and expressive of Christian, Protestant and Reformed orthodoxy, *constructive Calvinism* sees the need for ongoing reformation of theology and *praxis* according to God's Word.

Far from signaling a departure from the Reformed faith, constructive Calvinism seeks the renewal of the original intent of the reformers; namely, the return of the church to the simplicity and vibrancy of the apostolic era. By peeling back layers of extraneous tradition and inordinate emphasis on external forms, constructive Calvinists seek to propagate and defend biblical Christianity in ways relevant and effective to the present. This adeptness requires:

I. THE REESTABLISHMENT OF THE SUPREMACY OF SCRIPTURE

For all our repetitions of the Reformation slogan *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone), there is a sensing that our tradition is turning as much to history as to Scripture for the guidance of our faith. This is not to be misunderstood. Constructive Calvinists seek not to pit the notion of *sola Scriptura* against history, for the Reformers were rooted in history (such as in their use of the church fathers) and lauded Bible-based tradition. Rather, constructive Calvinists seek to point out exactly that against which the Reformers protested, namely, history's trumping of Scripture's supreme authority. Remember how Luther bravely pronounced his conscience captive to the Word of God. His critics called this hubris, denying that one monk could challenge fifteen hundred years of the church's history and thought. But it was Scripture that gave Luther his authority, and it gives us the authority today when our traditions are accorded authority en par with Scripture regardless of whether they accord with it or not.

This, of course, does not mean that we abolish all tradition or say that all traditions need amending. That is how relativists and iconoclasts think. Nonetheless, as those calling ourselves Protestant and Reformed, we have a duty to keep our traditions before the light of Scripture. Even traditions reflecting biblical principle can nevertheless become enmeshed in the confusion between the principle and the preferences pertaining to its application.

By going back to Scripture, we are better able to clear the confusion and the hampering of the work of the gospel. The return to Scripture attests whether our resistance to change is a form of spiritual rebellion or idolatry, or not. Changes which are genuinely scriptural build on the many biblically demonstrable insights previously given to the church. In effect, the principles of Scripture remain even where the times call us to adapt their application.

II. THE REESTABLISHMENT OF THE BALANCE OF SCRIPTURE.

The Reformed tradition has been strong on the divineness of Scripture and the oneness of the gospel. It is the former which ensures the latter. How else could sixty-six books written over a period of 1600 years speak so harmoniously about the good news of Jesus? Yet Scripture also possesses a humanness. Our Reformed doctrine of Scripture teaches this, yet, in stressing the divineness of Scripture, we have not always done justice to its humanness.

In breathing out on "holy men of God" (2 Peter 1:21 [KJV]) the Spirit moved them to write the very word of God, yet in a way consistent with their own backgrounds, writing styles, readerships, etc. In consequence of this, Scripture contains an authorial diversity and, with it, an array of distinct yet harmonious perspectives on the one gospel. These multiple perspectives reflect the fact that the gospel is so rich in content that no author can encapsulate everything there is to know about it, not even under the inspiration of the Spirit. Only God, who knows all

¹ The following was first published as an article in *The Voice*, the church magazine of Seventh Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan, United States. It is adapted for use by From His Fullness Ministries.



things perfectly all of the time, can keep the entirety of the gospel before him and see it perfectly all at once.

Although the recovery of the humanness of Scripture leaves untouched the chief tenets of our Reformed faith, it challenges the theological methods used to express what it means to be Reformed; in particular, the way we logically order the doctrinal themes of Scripture. The humanness of Scripture raises questions about the shape and feel of some of our historic documents, although perhaps less so the Belgic Confession of Faith (1561) and the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) than the Westminster Standards. I am thinking especially of the inadequate attention paid to the unfolding of God's truth from the old to the new covenant eras and of the authorial diversity of the New Testament. Too often we find in our historic standards the cohesion of the system of theology taking precedence over the distinctive statements and figures of speech (etc.) of Scripture. As a result, the historic standards tend to be strong on making doctrinal connections, but the texts used as proof of the connections are not always convincing. While it is very rare that Reformed subordinate standards claim or state something unbiblical, we may legitimately question on times the way they arrive at things.

In short, our historical documents echo a high view of Scripture but not always a high use of them. While they remain excellent documents useful for teaching and for summarizing the faith we believe, they fall short of the Holy Scriptures. Not only are their words not the product of the extraordinary operation of the Spirit, they tend to possess but one genre, and lack the full content and literary richness of Scripture.

To some readers this acknowledgment may be unnerving, but, ironically, I don't think they would be to the reformers. Here's a modern rendering of the words of the compilers of the Scots Confession of 1560:

... if any man will note in this our confession any article or sentence repugnant to God's holy word, that it would please him of his gentleness and for Christian charity's sake to admonish us of the same in writing; and we upon our honor and fidelity, by God's grace do promise unto him satisfaction from the mouth of God, that is, from his holy Scriptures, or else reformation of that which he shall prove to be amiss.

The supremacy and balance of Scripture explains why the norm of expository preaching is so important. A break from catechetical preaching ought not to be understood as a losing touch with specific theology of the Reformed tradition as that theology is summed up in the heads or points of doctrine contained in the creeds and confessions. We may anticipate that by introducing the intermittent study of the historic documents to small group studies and to Sunday School classes. Not only does this way of proceeding free pulpit usage for direct proclamation of the Word on its own terms (and there are multiple reasons for doing this), it affords attendees of the groups a discussional format in which to better learn and to digest the biblical content of the historic documents of the Reformed faith.

III. THE REESTABLISHMENT OF THE CENTRALITY OF THE GOSPEL.

The history of the Reformed tradition has sadly been marred by many a division. We have not always been able to maintain a passion for truth without becoming contentious about doctrine and church-related issues. Part of the problem has been an inability to prioritize the importance of the various aspects of our belief and practice. Reared on stories of the courage of our heroes of the faith, we, too, have wanted to make our stand for truth. Yet in modeling the Reformers we sometimes forget that they were beset by the pressures of their contention and living at a very harsh time in history. Accordingly, they were sometimes overly aggressive about matters, which, with hindsight, were not so critical to the cause of orthodoxy and Protestant unity. If we follow their lead in this regard, as we have generally done, we shall continue to miss out on the visible unity they were keen to nurture among Protestants and the Reformed.

In praising God for the renewed publication of Reformed literature over the last half century and the resultant renewal of interest in Calvinism, we must develop all the same a sensitivity to the fact that we no longer live in Christendom or the modern era (c.1789–c.1950). We live in a so-called postmodern era. We need therefore to balance concerns internal to the church with those challenges from without. Returning our focus to the gospel is one way we can approach both. In preventing issues from obscuring Christ and his cross we must nevertheless remember that the Holy Spirit has been operative in the church since the Reformation. While we have not grasped all the reformers taught, and have sadly



left much behind, God's Spirit has continued to shed light on the truth, bringing further facets of it into view. I think, for example, of the growing interest in the Fatherhood of God, our union with Christ his Son, and our adoption as his sons. In time these fresh emphases will help us to balance better the juridical and relational (expressly familial) aspects of the gospel, just as Scripture does.

It is this enriched understanding of the faith we need to apply to the internal discussions of the church, but also to the pluralism of postmodernity, whether in the form of secular progressivism, Islam, or the new age, etc. While we maintain in our discussions with Roman Catholics the Protestant stance on the supremacy of Scripture; the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as Lord, Savior, and Head of the Church; the unrivalled saving power of the cross, the sacraments and the nature of the church; we recall that in the array of unbelief today we share many of the same concerns as Roman Catholics, and for all our critical differences in regard to the gospel, we agree that it is the answer to the dehumanization of a supposedly secular society.

IV. THE REESTABLISHMENT OF THE CATHOLICITY (UNIVERSALITY) OF THE CHURCH.

Whereas the Reformed faith was formulated in the somewhat parochial world of sixteenth-century Europe, we live it out in the globalized city of the present century. Yet, bunkered down in our churches, lamenting society from out of its hearing distance, we too often continue to operate on the basis of a long-lost parochialism. Still obsessing about otherwise legitimate rivalries centuries old, we have yet to capture the emphasis Jesus placed on his Kingdom and its global extension (Matt. 28:18-20). Meanwhile, legitimate gospel collaboration across denominational and national boundaries falls short of its potential.²

It remains the case that we tend to think of the differences that separate Christians than the commonalities. Look no further than the Reformed rivalries in Grand Rapids—the keenness to distinguish one continental Reformed denomination from another, and the continental Reformed denomination at large from likeminded conservative Presbyterian denominations.

The longer I am Reformed the more convinced I am that the global context of our day must impact the way in which we view our tradition of theology and the church at large. If I am right, why should we not use Scripture to fuse the continental and English-speaking strands of the Reformed tradition, utilizing the best of the Three Forms of Unity and the Westminster Standards to state afresh the Reformed faith for the day and the challenges in which we live?

Evidently, the World Reformed Fellowship (WRF) to which From His Fullness Ministries' belongs expresses something of this globalization. Interestingly, the WRF's theological commission has completed a new statement which expresses our faith within the context of our twenty-first century. While denominations may question whether an organization such as the WRF had the right to go ahead and do that—it would seem a stretch to argue this convincingly—the obvious retort is that denominations have proven very dilatory and unable when it comes to confessional renewal. To use an analogy drawn from soccer, “the beautiful game,” denominations have been good full backs but ineffective strikers.

Here, then, is the fourfold reestablishment that constructive Calvinism envisions. We seek not to sell the family silver but to polish it; to walk the old paths but with polished shoes. Maintaining the Reformed faith, we believe there is a more adept way to both expound it and to defend it. God grant us success!

~~~~~

---

<sup>2</sup> To avoid the extent of the collaboration in view from being misunderstood, my comments here should be read in light of From His Fullness' *Position Statement #1: Collaborating with the Roman Catholic Church Today?*